THE SHELDON SIX

SUSAN

GRACE M. REMICK

Dougherty

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"THAT'S JUST THE WAY YOU USED TO TALK"

THE SHELDON SIX
SUSAN

By

GRACE M. REMICK

Author of

"The Glenloch Girls"

Illustrated by

ISABLE W. CALEY

PHILADELPHIA

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The Sheldon Six—Susan

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INTRODUCTION

MR. SHELDON, father of Anne, Rose, Connie, Susan, Ellis and Jim, likened his family to an automobile, and called it the " Sheldon Six." The first book of the series belongs to Anne, to whom he gave the part of steering-gear. Filling that office was not easy, but she succeeded in satisfying her family, and in getting rid of her own shy aloofness.

Rose, who always pushed everything along quickly when she put her hand to it, was called the accelerator, and the second story is principally about her. It tells of a summer spent in the country; of new friends; of the conquering of Rose's dislike for Jean Graham who became the beloved Motherje of the last two books.

There is an interval of two years between Rose's book and the next one. This third book belongs to Connie, who had been called by her father the carburetor, or " heart," of the imaginary family machine. To be helpful is as natural to her as to breathe, and she is so dependable that the others all believe that the family could not run smoothly without her. In her book we meet Uncle Duncan, a long-lost relative of Motherje, and Robert Bruce whom the Sheldons adopt as a cousin. And at the

end comes a break in the family when Anne is married.

Five years go by, and now we have Susan's book which must tell its own story. Susan had never properly been named as a part of the family car, but she goes through experiences which finally suggest to her a name. Of all the Sheldons she has the hardest trouble to conquer, but her quick determination and her grit help her through.

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The Sheldon Six—Susan

CHAPTER I

A FAMILY DINNER

A WARM breeze blew in at the window and ruffled Susan's hair as she sat at her desk. She had just begun a letter to a former chum who had moved away from Melford a year ago and still yearned to hear every detail of Susan's daily life.

" I ought to be down-stairs this minute helping Connie fix the table for dinner to-night," she went on, " but Rose came home at noon from the office, and they won't want me bothering them. I'm quite sure they can do it better without me. It's pretty hot, too, and my room has a breeze.

" The other members of the family are in the city, but they'll be home in time for dinner which is to be a sort of wedding feast for Ellis.

" Isn't that a startling piece of news? Perhaps you read it in the newspaper.

" You see Ellis had the chance to take charge of the London office, so he and Ellen Ramsay were married right away, and to-night they are going to New York, and on Saturday they sail for Europe.

"I'm heart-broken over having Ellis married; but, of course, I've got to get used to it—and I perfectly love Ellen which makes it more bearable."

Susan leaned back in her chair and fanned herself with a blotter. Then she stretched her fingers and wiped the sticky penholder.

"It's hot as mustard, but it's kind of a relief even to write someone how I feel about Ellis," she said to herself. "It's no good to tell it to the family, because they all think they're going to miss him just as much."

She did not take up her pen again immediately, but sat staring out of the window with eyes that scarcely saw the glories of Connie's midsummer garden. She could almost wish she hadn't got so fond of this big brother of hers during the last year. Before that she had not felt so very well acquainted with him—it had seemed to her that he was always criticising the way she was being brought up, always trying to make her over to suit his own ideas. Then, unexpectedly, he had begun to take her about a little and to seem interested in how she looked, and to confide to her some of his hopes and plans. Why, she had been the very first one to hear about it when he was engaged to Ellen.

"Of course, Susanna, Father and Mother ought to be told first," he had said, "but you've been a

good little pal, and we'll keep it for a deep-down secret that you knew before the others."

And, naturally, she had promised not to tell, and hadn't minded a bit that he had called her Susanna, which from anyone else she could not stand.

She picked up the penholder again.

"I shall miss Ellis most dreadfully."

In the intensity of her feeling she dropped a large blot on the last word thereby seeming to put the whole sentence into mourning. Having dimmed it with the blotter she went on.

"I'm sure I didn't care so much five years ago when Anne got married and went out west. But then, of course, I was only nine and I was so proud over having a brother-in-law that I didn't think about much else. Except, for once, getting as much ice-cream as I wanted.

"What queer things children are, aren't they? I should think I would have been too thrilled to care about eating. But there's an e-normous difference between nine and fourteen, isn't there, Phyllis?

"Anne and Archie have never stayed away a whole year since they were married. They would be here now to say good-by to Ellis if Archibald Bradley Third hadn't managed to pick up the measles. He's such a darling. Just three years old. I'm really crazy about children, Phyl, if they don't bother me when I don't want them.

"You know Motherje's Uncle Duncan—well, now that Ellen is married, he's coming back to live with us again. Jim and I are awfully excited about it. He's a perfect dear. Uncle Duncan, I mean; not Jim. Don't make that mistake.

"For one who doesn't like to work I think I've done pretty well to write a long letter like this on a hot afternoon. I'm sure that, by this time, it is too late to help Connie and Rose, so I'll just take a little snooze and be all ready to meet Ellis and his bride. Doesn't that sound romantic? Dear me! If 'twas anyone but Ellen I just couldn't stand it.

"Goodness! I'm sizzling.

"Yours warmly,

"SUSAN ELLIS SHELDON.

"P. S. Peggy and Frances wanted me to send their love when I wrote. Also, you needn't worry about my getting too intimate with Edith Lane. Between you and me, I don't like her, but there's something about her that fascinates me. She's been away all summer, but they have let us use their tennis ground, and we've had a gorgeous time. I really haven't minded not going away.

"S."

Having sealed and stamped her letter Susan tiptoed around the room making things comfortable for her nap. She was convinced that if she did not call herself to the attention of her sisters they would not miss her assistance.

"Anyway, it would only be running all over the house and to the stores for things they want, and if

I'm not there they'll make something else do—or go without. Which is really more economical—so I'm doing Daddy a favor."

This last seeming a fairly satisfactory excuse she considered the subject closed for the time being, and curling up on the couch was asleep in five minutes.

Two hours later, rested and tubbed, and fresh as a flower in green organdy, Susan stepped into the hall to see Connie just disappearing into her room, and Rose hurrying up the stairs.

"Coming up?" asked Susan, feeling it an immediate necessity to say something pleasant that would divert attention from herself. She was unwillingly conscious of the contrast between her sister's flushed weariness and her own coolness.

"No, I'm going down," snapped Rose, taking in the situation at a glance. "Where under the sun have you been? Connie and I have wanted you a dozen times. I don't see why you're never 'round when you're needed."

"I was in my room—you could have called me." Susan was on the defensive at once; she hated to be found fault with.

"Well, perhaps it's just as well you're dressed," Rose admitted. "Connie and I are wrecks, and there ought to be somebody who doesn't look as if she'd been working hard. You'll fit that part perfectly."

Rose started on again, then turned for another look at her young sister. "You're really a refreshing sight in that cool green; I believe I'm glad you eluded us. Only—why will you wear that broad ribbon across your forehead? I don't see how you girls stand it. It looks like a bandage for a headache. And so tight!"

"Well, I suppose I have to keep my hair back, don't I? You're always fussing at me when it blows around."

"Haven't you something narrower that you can put around your head—not on your forehead? You know Ellis hates that headachy effect. He's awfully particular."

"I—think—I have," answered Susan as doubtfully as if she hadn't bought a special piece of narrow velvet to match this dress just after the last family upheaval on this same subject.

"Well, for pity's sake put it on if you have any consideration for our feelings."

Rose hurried off to her room, and Susan went back into hers and surveyed herself gloomily in the mirror. She had felt that the broad ribbon was a most effective touch, but now that Rose had said "headache bandage" she could think of nothing else. It did look tight—she could see where the skin was drawn in little wrinkles. Oh, well! She supposed one's family had to have their say even

after one was quite grown up. Being the youngest wasn't the most joyful thing in the world.

And then, a little ashamed of herself for even thinking this last, she tucked her bright locks under the narrow green velvet and went down-stairs.

For a few minutes she wandered around looking at the rooms which her sisters had made so attractive, and half-wishing she had had a hand in it all. Flowers everywhere; it took a lot of time to arrange flowers, but Connie liked to do that herself. The table beautifully set with gleaming glass and polished silver ——

"Really more than two can't help about setting a table; a third person would be just in the way," remarked that comforting part of Susan which always helped her to forgive herself for duties neglected.

She bent to examine the place cards which Rose had brought home with her. A bride and groom for Ellen and Ellis; bridesmaids for Connie, Rose and herself. It was a whole wedding party with Neil as best man; Uncle Duncan, a portly relative giving away the bride; Roger Bradley and Jimsey as ushers. Susan objected scornfully to the mother and father of the party who seemed, in their elderliness, a generation farther along than Motherje and Daddy.

"Why do they always make mothers and fathers

seem so old? Ours are almost as young as we are," she said to herself, as she went out on the front porch, and settled herself in a chair to wait for the automobile. "And I will say that Uncle Duncan doesn't look a bit like the fat man on his card. He's just a—a lovely white-haired young man."

She wondered how long it would be before the automobile would arrive. Neil was driving them all out from the city, and, later, he and Roger would take Mr. and Mrs. Ellis Sheldon back again in time for the train to New York. How strange it made Ellen and Ellis seem to call them that. She sighed deeply over the thought that in so few hours she would have to say good-by to Ellis. It was dreadful to lose your favorite brother for a whole year. Of course Jimsey had his good points, too; but he was an awful tease.

As if evoked by her thought of him, Jim's fair, curly head was poked out of the doorway.

"Is Connie there?" he inquired anxiously. "Or—or anyone but you? I want someone to sew on a button for me."

"Connie's dressing. I might do it for you if I were urged," said Susan getting up somewhat grudgingly. She hated to sew buttons on, particularly when the clothes were on the person. As she followed Jim into the house she dwelt on this dislike, even exaggerated it, because to sacrifice her-

self so promptly seemed in a degree to make up for not helping her sisters this afternoon. Susan had a nice sense of balance about such things, and tried to keep the scales adjusted to her own satisfaction.

Going up-stairs she remarked soberly, "I did want to see them all dash up in the automobile; I hope it won't take too long—have you got the button?"

"No," answered Jim without shame; he was used to being asked this. "You'll have to hunt one. But you're so quick and clever it won't take a jiffy. Why, I could sew it on myself if I had eyes under my chin and an elastic neck."

Susan knew that his remark about her cleverness was mere flattery and intended to make her work more willingly, but she forbore to take it up with him. It would save time not to argue. She found a button in the drawer of the sewing-table; threaded a needle expeditiously and, above all things, remembered not to sew the button too tight, but to leave a neck on it and wind it with the thread before fastening off.

"There!" she said at last, tugging at the button. "That won't come off in a hurry. And there's the automobile and I must fly."

"Thanks—awfully," said Jimsey in a surprised voice; he really had not expected her to do it so well. "I—I said you were quick and clever, didn't

I?" he shouted as she dashed from the room. "And now I say you're a—you're a ——" he could not find the word he wanted, but there was no need to finish his sentence for Susan was quite out of hearing.

Looking out of the window he saw that the automobile had stopped, and his sister, in her fluttering dress, had run out to meet it.

"She looks like—like one of those pale-green butterflies I've been trying to catch," muttered Jim, with a seriousness that would have convinced even Susan.

It was an exceedingly cheerful company at the dinner-table that night. The conversation was so gay that Susan, who had never acquired the habit of concealing her sorrows for the sake of others, kept very quiet for a long time, and darkly suspected that the rest of them did not care as much as she did about losing Ellis.

Father and Motherje weren't talking much, she noticed; Uncle Duncan was very quiet for him, and Ellen had a queer, wistful smile on her face whenever she looked at Neil and Uncle Duncan whom she had been mothering for the last five years.

On the other hand there was Neil, sitting next to his sister Ellen, and talking and laughing in a way quite unusual. To be sure he did stop once in awhile right in the midst of a sentence and look as

if he had entirely forgotten how he had meant to finish it.

But whenever this happened, Rose started in telling funny stories, and the others were all ready to laugh. Even Connie, who was always sure to feel any break in the family circle, was holding up her end of the fun.

Of course Susan laughed with the others, because she wouldn't for the world have let them think that she didn't see the point of the jokes and stories. But she couldn't get over the feeling that she should hate to have them act so happy if she were going away for a long, long time.

Suddenly there came a pause in the conversation, and Jim, who had been keeping something in the back of his mind, because he did not know whether he'd better say it, let it pop out in spite of his doubts.

"I say, Father," he drawled, "it's going to give the imaginary family car a severe wallop, isn't it, to have the chauffeur go across the ocean."

"Well, of all things, Jimsey! Whatever made you remember to rake that up?" Rose fairly jumped into the conversation as if she thought her father ought not to be obliged to answer this question. "I don't believe we've mentioned the 'Sheldon Six' since Nan was married."

Her father smiled. "Considering that Anne

was the steering-gear the poor old car has been somewhat out of repair since her departure," he observed. " Nevertheless our accelerator still accelerates, and our carburetor keeps on being very much the ' heart of the machine.' " He smiled and nodded at Rose and Connie as he spoke. " And as for the chauffeur," his glance sought Ellis with an air of fatherly pride, " I haven't forgotten the summer when Ellis took the wheel of our imaginary car at the time we needed him most."

His eyes were suspiciously soft and shining as they rested on his son, and it could not be denied that when Ellis murmured a " thank you, sir," his voice was husky.

Suddenly a great illumination came to Susan. This was why everyone had been talking nonsense! It was to keep Ellen and Ellis and Father—particularly Father—from feeling too unhappy. And now Jimsey had done it with his foolish question. Just like a boy to be so tactless. She was glad she had not brought up the subject; as a matter of fact she could remember scarcely anything about it.

" What did they call you, Jim? " asked Roger Bradley, just when no one else seemed to be able to think of anything else to say.

" Why, Dad was the gentleman owner, and I was the gentleman friend of the gentleman owner.

Trust me for picking out an easy job," chuckled Jim.

"That's nothing to be proud of," commented Susan severely. "I can't remember that I was anything, but if I had been it would have been something worth while."

"No wonder you can't remember, Susan. You were only six when we first had our names," said Connie. "But you offered to be the squawker. We never really called you that, though."

"I should hope not. That's the voice of the car, though, and I like to talk," ventured Susan with unexpected imagination. "Anyway, you took all the nice parts and didn't leave me anything."

"You might be a defective bearing," proposed Jim hopefully. "Or a snubber—you'd be perfect for that."

"I shan't be either of those," responded Susan with proper scorn. "I think the whole thing is very childish, anyway." And then, unexpectedly, she found herself looking straight into Uncle Duncan's eyes, and her dignity melted under his smile.

"Why not qualify for the position of radiator," he suggested, "and then be very particular as to the quality of what you radiate."

"Good for Uncledy!" applauded Connie, but her younger sister showed no such enthusiasm.

"Why, that would be one of the very hardest things," she objected. "But it's—it's all rather foolish, isn't it? I don't believe I'll be in it. I don't like to work any better than Jim does."

"But, my child," teased Roger, "don't tell me that you don't love to go to school, and study hard, and lend a helping hand in the housework. I'm deeply grieved."

"Fudge! You're not!" contradicted Susan. "No, I don't like any of those things. I love to play games and have a good time."

"You needn't tell us that ——" began Jim, but Neil interrupted.

"You might be one of those gay little balloons that some persons fasten on the front of the car," he said, looking at her thoughtfully. "There's something rather fluttery and colorful about you."

Susan eyed him with suspicion. She was not sure whether this was a compliment or not.

"No, I'm not going to be anything," she repeated, and emphasized the statement with a shake of her curly head. "You can't expect Jim and me to feel the same about the imaginary games you played when you were young."

"Oh, but it wasn't an imaginary game. It was a real game—at least a sort of game—about an imaginary family car," corrected Jim. "You must

be more careful about words, Susanna. And anyway, *I* do feel the same. Probably, you're too young."

"I'm not either—and if you really do feel like the others you'd have a respectable part, and not just lounge on the seat."

"I have—I've just thought of one. I'm the brake, and I'm going to put it on when I see you doing things you ought not to do."

"Goodness knows you try to manage me enough now," protested Susan. "This being the youngest ——" but then Motherje rose, and they all went into the living-room.

When Susan looked at Ellis she had a queer feeling in her throat that made her want to rush from the room and hide until the leave-takings were over. It seemed as if she had begun to miss him already; as if she knew at this moment how she was going to feel when she could not see him every day. Big brothers are such a comfort.

Unbelievably soon the confusion of departure was upon them. Susan, seeing her father, with that queer, shining look in his eyes, under the hall light, felt strangely impelled to slip out of the group surrounding her brother and stay out of sight and in the dark.

The front porch offered the nearest haven, but presently some of the family went out to the wait-

ing car, and Ellis found her and pulled her away from the others.

"Good-by, Susanna," he said, very softly for him. "You and I are going to be pals just the same; don't you forget that. You write me—tell me everything you're doing—and sometime you'll get a letter from me. How 'bout it?"

"Yes, I'll write"—it was hard to say even three words.

"And look here," his manner grew deeply confidential, "of course I know you didn't mean for a minute what you said at the table about always wanting to have a good time, and not liking to work, but"—he took both her hands in a strong clasp —"believe me it isn't good even to say those things too often. You might get to thinking they were true, you know.

"Like my sermon?" he questioned with a hug that left her breathless. "You know your big brother's proud of you, don't you?"

Then he kissed her and was gone. And after a moment in the darkness by herself, she ran out to the automobile with the others.

It was no use to wave at a car that was swallowed up in darkness almost as soon as it started. Susan watched the rear light until it turned to rainbow colors under her misty gaze. Then, with great secrecy, she dabbed her eyes and went into the house.

"Hello, Susanna!" Jim planted himself in front of her as she came within the radiance of the hall light, and looked at her questioningly. "Feeling a bit teary, old girl?"

"Don't you call me Susanna," stormed Susan fiercely. "That isn't your name for me. I—I won't have it." Without trusting herself to say good-night to anyone she was off up-stairs.

"After several hours of perfect sweetness and harmony," remarked Rose solemnly when Susan was out of hearing, "the family balance is now restored. I will say, Jim, I think it was mean of you to notice that. There are some of us who hate to have it mentioned when we feel weepy."

"How'd I know she was going to be so touchy about it?" growled Jim, wrinkling his forehead. "I'd just as soon tell her—by George I *will* tell her"—he was half-way up the stairs now and his next words came back to them in a gentle roar—"that I'm not a million miles from feeling weepy myself."

CHAPTER II

CORN AND TOMATOES

"FORTY-LOVE! Oh, Edith, do brace up for a change and make a point. Now, here's an easy serve." Susan sent a slow ball over the net and shrugged impatiently as her opponent missed. "That ends it. Love-set! Ede, I'll bring over Jiggy Grant to play with you. She's only five, but she's willing to try. This is certainly no fun for me."

"You don't suppose I mind being beaten a love-set, do you?" The other girl's flat-sounding laugh, which punctuated nearly all she said, showed her white teeth. "The only reason I play at all is because father wouldn't let me have the court unless I'd promise to learn. He has a wild idea that I need exercise, but I don't see it that way. Let's sit down and talk." Edith Lane dropped her racquet, kicked a ball out of the way as she turned, and started for the rustic seat on the other side of the court.

"Pick up your racquet—you'll probably leave it out all night if you don't—and it's a shame to spoil a dandy racquet like that. Where's the third ball?"

"Oh, Susan, you do boss me so. I don't know where the ball is; it was your last serve."

"It came over your side. Get back here and help find it," pursued the unyielding Susan. "And I just want to tell you one thing: you may not care whether you put up a decent game, or not, but you can't expect the rest of us to like to play with you."

"Well, you don't have to come here. I must say you've seemed to like it well enough this summer." Edith looked sulky and offended, but she stooped for her racquet, and peered helplessly around in search of the third ball, nevertheless. In spite of contrary intention she usually yielded something to Susan's imperious manner.

"Here it is," exulted Susan. "I was a brute to say that, Ede, when you've just got home—and your father let us play here all the time you were away. But you do make me cross, because you never seem to care whether you do anything well or not."

"I don't. Why should I?" demanded Edith placidly, as they walked across the velvety lawn toward the bench near the gladiolus bed. "As long as I can slide through I'm not going to worry my head off about *how* I do it."

Susan frowned and did not answer. For some reason that last sentence sounded as familiar as if

she had said it herself. She had a vague, unpleasant feeling that she had used it in some argument with her mother about school or piano practice. But then, of course, those things were different; in games you had to have team-work and play your best, and be a good loser if you couldn't win, and ——

"Don't look so solemn over it," Edith said mockingly. "I love you in the same old way if you are horrid to me. Now tell me how you all are and what's happened to everybody." She settled herself on the bench and tried to pull Susan down beside her, but Susan preferred the soft grass with the bench for a back.

"The biggest thing that has happened in our family," she said dreamily, "is that my brother, Ellis, was married and has gone to Europe for a year. But I wrote you about that three weeks ago."

"Yes, but you didn't give me any description of the wedding. Were you bridesmaid? You must have looked lovely. What did you wear?"

"It was Ellen Ramsay who looked lovely," said Susan. "I can't get used to calling her Ellen Sheldon. It all happened in such a hurry, that we didn't have time to think of any new clothes. Rose and Connie and I stood up with them in our best white dresses. I never noticed till afterwards that mine hiked up a little on one side."

Edith laughed. "You probably looked perfectly ducky. My mother's always wishing she had a daughter with pansy-blue eyes like yours and golden hair and a cute nose. But, if I do say it, the one she's got isn't so bad. Really, now you ought to agree with me."

"I should say not." Susan looked up at Edith with frank admiration. She liked the dark beauty of hair and eyes, and the proud way in which Edith carried her head. And her clothes—Susan unconsciously breathed a sigh in tribute to Edith's clothes. When one has three older sisters there are times ——

"Wake up and tell me what else has happened," demanded Edith. "What have the others been doing and where are they?"

"Well, since the wedding, Rose has had her vacation, but she's back in the office now; Jim went off camping and won't be home until just before school begins. And Uncle Duncan and Connie are taking a long automobile trip. They are planning to look at gardens especially. You know Connie's going to be a garden architect."

"I know," Edith assented, and went on with a patronizing air, "my father thinks she is wonderful. I'm sure he means to have her plan our garden for next summer. That is—I think he'll have her if you and I keep friends."

"What difference does that make?" demanded Susan bluntly. "I don't see ——"

"Well, you will see." Edith's laugh made Susan shrug impatiently; there were times when she wanted to get away from the sound of it. "Just you try getting intimate with some other girl and not come when I want you." She laughed again—over nothing at all so far as Susan could see.

"I can make my father do almost anything if I only manage right," Edith went on complacently.

"Well, I can't, and I'd hate it if I could." Susan sat up straight, and looked homeward in her mind. "Of course I don't like it when Father won't let me do things," she went on after a thoughtful moment, "but, honestly, I shouldn't want him to give in to me because I teased or managed. I like to feel that he's a—a rock, and I'm just one of the little waves beating against him."

"Dear me! Make it into rhyme and sing it. Susan, you're getting poetical, and I can't stand that."

"Neither can I. Jimsey bores me to death reading his poetry to me. Why is it when anyone makes a rhyme he has to go and read it to someone else?"

"Don't ask me. Tell me where all the girls and boys are, and what you've been doing this summer."

Susan felt this rather an infliction, but she began with creditable patience. She never could understand why Edith, who had lived here less than a year, should have such a persistent curiosity about the every-day life of Melford people.

"There, that's all I know about anyone," she ended, after a rambling recital. "Oh, I forgot the new boy! He and his mother live in the bungalow just at the edge of Mr. York's woods. You know —you go down our street to get to it."

"Are they nice? Do you like them?"

"Can't tell you. They don't seem to want to know anyone. I haven't seen the mother—I don't even know their name—but the boy goes by and never looks at any of us."

"Bashful, probably," murmured Edith. "It's hot here; let's go over into the shade. I want to tell you about some wonderful things that happened to me this summer."

"I can't stay," Susan answered, not offering to move. "I slid out after lunch, because I half-suspected Motherje would ask me to wash the dishes so that Tillie could get out earlier. I—I'm afraid I forgot to mention where I was going." She laughed, and the color deepened in her cheeks. "That is—just naturally I took pains not to remember. I must go home ver-y soon, because Motherje will be getting dinner to-night."

"It's early yet—only about four." Edith consulted her wrist watch with an accustomed air fascinating to Susan who had not yet achieved that luxury. "Do you always have to tell where you're going? How queer!"

"It isn't queer at all." There was that in Edith's tone which made Susan hotly defend this family rule to which she often had objected. "It's perfectly natural for Motherje to want to know where Jim and I are. The others always told when they were our ages—even Rose, and she was the most independent one of the family. Of course, Motherje and Daddy are very particular about how we are brought up."

Color rose in Edith's cheeks. There was a hint of superiority in this last observation which made it seem almost like a reflection upon the methods in the Lane family. "Anyway, your mother can be about sure where you are when I'm in Melford," she remarked. "Tell me again where you got such an ab—such a queer name for her."

"Why, her name is Jean, and when she married Daddy, Connie began calling her Mother Jean. Then Rose shortened that to Motherje. Simple, wasn't it, and I don't see that it's absurd at all." Susan got up hastily. "Talking about her makes me want to see her. I'm going."

Edith caught her by the skirt and smiled beguil-

ingly. "Don't go yet, honey-girl. Sit down again. I want to talk to you." And then, as Susan showed no sign of yielding, "You know you don't have to go. I dare say you'll stop at Peggy's house."

"Perhaps." Susan twitched her skirt from Edith's grasp. "I'm going," she announced with determination, "and if I want to stop at Fran's and Peggy's I shall do it. So there!"

As she often did when Susan made a decided stand, Edith yielded surprisingly. "Oh, well, if you do see them tell 'em I've got home and that I love 'em in the same old way." She spoke with such apparent good-nature that Susan looked at her in amazement. There were times when she couldn't tell whether Edith meant things or was just putting them on.

"I will—but I'm going straight home, and I probably shan't see them. Good-by. I've had a nice time. Come over."

Only the fact that she was in Edith's view kept Susan from running and leaping across the lawn in her haste to get back to Motherje. She never felt like doing those little-girl things before Edith.

Motherje, to her and to Jim, was really mother, the only one they could remember; and during the seven years she had been with them Susan could recall many times when she had felt this same com-

pelling desire to see her and assure herself that everything was right between them. The feeling usually came, she admitted frankly, when she, herself, had not played fair. Motherje always played fair; there was no shadow of doubt about that.

It was late August and a warm afternoon. Many of the houses in the neighborhood had a beshuttered air of taking an afternoon nap, and for no apparent reason a sudden feeling of loneliness stole over Susan.

"I shall certainly be glad when Jimsey gets back from camp," she was thinking as she ran up the front steps. The next instant she saw Tillie, festively arrayed, walking out of the side door with never a glance toward the front of the house. Susan gave one thought to wondering why Tillie hadn't got started before, and then went into the house.

Once inside, the feeling of loneliness deepened—became a conviction that she was the only one in the house.

"Motherje!" she called with no expectation of response, and then her glance fell on a note lying on the hall table, and she pounced upon it.

"Susan, dear," it began, and the reader felt an instant relief because Motherje did not seem formal or offended.

"A most surprising thing has happened, and as you did not tell me where you were going, I could not let you know about it. Soon after lunch, my cousin, Robert Bruce and his son, whom you surely remember ——"

"Remember!" Susan spoke out loud, her emphasis obliterating the five years that had elapsed since "Brucey" spent a winter with them. "Remember! I should say I did. He had reddish hair and he was always making it stand up on his head. And freckles! And he didn't like girls. We always fought."

Her gaze went back to the note.

"called here. They were much disappointed to miss you, and young Robert was heart-broken over Jim's absence."

"Of course. He would be," Susan commented scornfully. "Well, he needn't think I'm not just as nice as Jim."

"Cousin Robert wanted you and me to come in and have dinner with them at his hotel, and finally I consented, though I hated to go without you. We shall telephone Daddy when we get in town.

"Tillie offered to wait until you got home as I couldn't go off and leave the house locked, so I'm hoping you won't be too late. I can't stop to write anything about dinner, but you and Rose can manage, I'm sure.

"Sorry, darling. Wish you could be with us and meet my cousins again.

"MOTHERJE."

"Dinner in a hotel! Brucey! Telephone Daddy!" exclaimed Susan, as she went back to the beginning and read the note again with an expression of deep disappointment. Then her eyes sought the clock.

"Quarter to five! Tillie must have been waiting with her hat on. No wonder she wouldn't look at me. Motherje doesn't say what time they left. Oh, dear, she might have telephoned Ede's house. She could pretty well guess I was there."

And then, because in the long run she was a straightforward young person, she added with hasty emphasis, "I don't blame her—I don't blame her a bit." Involuntarily she said this last aloud, and, happening to be in front of the hall mirror, half-expected to hear an answer from the girl looking out at her. Instead, the silence of the house fell upon her more heavily.

"Br-r-r!" She walked out on the porch and settled herself on the steps, from which she could look out to the corner and see everyone who got off the car. Soon a car would stop and Rose would get out. It would be time enough then to see about dinner. She hoped Rose wouldn't be very hungry: she was sure that she, herself, should never

be hungry again—this disappointment had gone too deep.

This was the first time Brucey had made the journey from Texas since that winter long ago when she had been going on nine and Jimsey was eleven. Robert Bruce was just about half-way between them, and Susan remembered that he had liked Jim from the first, but had not cared much for her.

"He'd be fifteen now," she said to herself. "Connie says I used to tag after him all the time, but I can't believe it. I shouldn't now, anyway."

Her mind reviewed the winter when her father and mother were away, and Mother's long-lost Uncle Duncan had unexpectedly come into the family, bringing with him young Robert Bruce from Texas. Anne was in college then, and Rose and Connie in High School, and now they were all grown up and Anne had a son.

"Lots of things to tell Brucey about if I'd only been here," she reflected mournfully. "That's the time I set a trap for myself and promptly fell in. If I hadn't been so mean about the dishes ——"

The car stopped at the corner and she leaned forward eagerly. Would it be Rose? She hoped so; she did not enjoy the house when it was empty and still.

No one in whom she was interested got off the car. Susan settled back on the step, and her gaze fell on a boy on the opposite side of the street coming from the other direction. It was the boy about whom she had just been telling Edith.

There seemed to be a feeling among Susan's companions that this boy did not belong in their set, anyway, and had no need to keep himself so aloof. Some of the boys held it against him that he had been seen wearing an apron and sweeping, while the girls resented the fact that he never seemed to be aware of their existence. As he passed, Susan discreetly studied her hands spread in her lap, though she was irritatingly sure that he would not even glance that way.

When he had got well by she looked at him and was suddenly reminded of Jim. He was not so tall nor so good-looking as Jimsey, but there was a certain something about the way he walked and held his head. It occurred to her that Jim would probably get acquainted with him when school began next week; this brother of hers was always taking the part of anyone who seemed the least bit unpopular.

Well, it wasn't getting her anywhere to be sitting here. She might go back to Edith's; or if she should wander by Peggy's house she would probably be invited to dinner. Peggy's mother never

seemed to mind how many unexpected guests shared the meals provided for her large family. But Susan hated what she called fishing for an invitation. And then what should she do about Rose?

She got up from the step unwillingly; she had been sitting on one foot and it took her some time to stamp and shake it into life again. She hated to go into the house and fuss around with dishes and cooking, and, afterwards, clearing away. She limped half-way to the sidewalk, her foot still prickling, to see if Rose had been held up by one of the neighbors on her way from the car.

"You slacker!" she said suddenly, and, because no one was within hearing, she said it aloud, and repeated it with vehemence. "You slacker! If you hadn't slid out of doing a little work this afternoon you'd be having a nice, easy time now. Go on into the house! You know you're just waiting, hoping Rose'll say she'll get the dinner. Go on in! Shame on you! Scat!"

She went in laughing, with her indolence stirred into action, and the acuteness of her disappointment softened. She would get things ready for Rose, and she would do it in style.

She looked at the fire and found a good one. Then she washed her hands and investigated the ice-box. Chops! Fine! She knew how to cook

those. Some cold potatoes! She would heat them and garnish them with chives from the vegetable garden. "Garnish!" That sounded like someone who knew a great deal about cooking. It made her think of Connie, and she sighed. Home didn't seem like home with Connie away. It was too bad things had to change.

She continued her exploration. Here was lettuce, and she would get tomatoes from the garden. She began to feel capable and really interested in doing this. Rose would be surprised and a good deal impressed, she hoped.

Out in the garden the warm sunshine shot straight into her eyes as she stooped to pick the vegetables, and a teasing breeze blew tendrils of yellow hair about her face. This was the pleasant part of getting the dinner, she was thinking, as she pulled the delicate blades of the chives, and hunted for the ripest tomatoes. Connie certainly had a magic that made flowers and vegetables grow their best.

She noticed a cucumber and picked that, and then, for good measure, another. The corn-patch tempted her. Rose was fond of corn, and so was she when her appetite hadn't been taken away by a disappointment. She was immediately conscious that she was hungry; that no disappointment could take away her appetite for corn.

Twelve ears of corn were a good many for just Rose and herself, she was thinking a few minutes later, but not worse than six tomatoes. Jimsey was always telling her that she hadn't any judgment about size and quantity. Well, anyway, the tomatoes they didn't eat could be stewed, and Tillie could make corn fritters.

She felt a glow of pride over this thrifty disposal of left-overs, but was immediately reduced to perplexity by the problem of trying to pick up anything as small as a bunch of chives when her arms were full of corn and tomatoes. Then she must somehow manage the cucumbers.

The whole thing was complicated by the fact that when she was most precariously bent, the kitchen door blew shut with a loud bang, startling her into dropping three of her tomatoes and an ear or two of corn.

"Oh, dear!" she groaned. "Of course, I never thought to set the catch on that door! Now I shall have to go 'round to the front looking like a—a huckster's wagon."

It was a perilous journey. The wind blew her short curly hair in every way except the way it should go, and, like a restive pony, she shook her head to keep the straying locks out of her eyes. This was dangerous energy, however, and twice she had to stoop with infinite caution, once to re-

trieve a cucumber, and the second time an ear of corn.

By the time she had nearly reached the corner of the house everything was sagging and slipping, and she was just making up her mind to run for it when her attention was caught by the sound of voices. At the same moment she became aware that a bell which she had been hearing for some time without giving it conscious attention was her own door-bell.

She listened. An unfamiliar voice said, "Well, if anyone's at home she ought to hear that." Then there was another prolonged ringing of the bell.

"She was at home a little while ago when I went by here; she can't be far away." The second voice was positive and encouraging.

At once Susan remembered that the only one who had gone by was the boy from the bungalow. So he had condescended to see her after all. Well, she certainly shouldn't go around to the front door until they had departed. Looking like this! She guessed not. Involuntarily she gave her head a twitch to dislodge a blinding strand of hair, and the biggest tomato slipped, but halted, crushed in her nervous clutch.

"What a mess!" Susan was in despair. "Now I simply *can't* go." And almost immediately her feet carried her stealthily forward a step or two, be-

cause she was so anxious to see whether it really *was* that boy, and who the other was.

"I hate to give up." The first voice sounded disappointed.

"I'm sorry. I thought I was steering you straight to your friends. There is someone here usually."

There was something very attractive about the second voice, the unseen listener decided.

"Wait a minute," the second voice proposed hopefully. "I'll dash back here a few steps. Perhaps I'll see her in the garden. Perhaps"—in a suddenly inspired tone—"she's gone out to pick vegetables for dinner."

"Dash back!" That meant that he was coming to the side of the house where she was. She ought to be the one to do the dashing. Why should he be so helpful? Then she faced her fate stonily and knew she could not move an inch.

The next moment it was all over, and Susan had seen first surprise, then the satisfaction of having discovered her, then irrepressible amusement in the face of the boy who lived in the bungalow.

Before she could speak he had vanished, and, as she walked around the corner of the house, she heard him say:

"There's someone here. You're all right now. Good-by."

The next moment a boy who looked both strange and familiar, launched himself from the porch and strode quickly toward her.

"Jingo, Susan!" he said as if he had seen her only yesterday. "I came back not expecting to have much dinner, but now I'm glad I'm here."

CHAPTER III

THE SAME OLD BRUCEY

SUSAN stared at him unbelievingly, and the boy went off into a jolly roar of laughter. "I'd know you in—in Egypt," he chuckled. "That's the very way you used to glare at me when you thought I was going to play a trick on you.

"See here," he went on, and extracted from his pocket a small ball, once red, now colored only in spots. "Remember this? That's what you tossed after me when I left. You beat me skating on account of these. Remember? Why don't you say something? I'm Brucey. Shake on it."

"You haven't given me much chance to speak." Susan started to put out her hand, and then realized that if she did it would mean downfall for the vegetable structure she had so carefully erected.

"You wouldn't want to shake hands with me," she said resignedly. "I didn't know I was squeezing that tomato so hard. Anyway, I'm glad to see you."

"Oh, I say, you did have a grip on it. It's dripping on your dress. Here, let me take some of those things." Robert Bruce deftly extracted the

corn and cucumbers from her grasp and laid them on the ground. Then he proceeded to collect the tomatoes.

"What's this? Looks like grass." He picked a small green bunch from between two of her fingers which held it rigidly and refused to move. "Let go! Then you can wipe your tomatery hand on the grass."

"I clutched those things so hard my fingers are stiff." Susan sighed with relief and obediently scrubbed her hand in the grass. "My, but this is just like old times to have you telling me what I must do, and fussing because my hands are dirty. You and Jimsey were always very particular about *my* hands."

"Good old Jim! I'm just plain discouraged to have him away when I get here after such an age." By this time Robert was piling the ears of corn on one arm. "I'll carry in this truck for you and then we'll fix your dress. Better take that stain right out. I'll show you."

Susan looked at him disapprovingly. "That's just the way you used to talk. I believe you still think you know everything. We shan't get on a bit, because I'm sure I know just about everything."

"Well, that's no great change, either. But it won't keep us from getting out that stain." Now

Robert's arms were full, and he was starting toward the house. "You open the door for me and then scoot up-stairs and change your dress. I'll be in the kitchen taking care of these things." He walked into the house and turned in the right direction without hesitation. "Nothing like feeling at home," he called back as he went through the dining-room.

Coming down ten minutes later in a dress of blue and white gingham Susan seemed the very essence of summer, and her guest regarded her with frank approval.

"That's a good-looking dress; I like it. Where's the other one?"

"We needn't bother about that now. Tillie will manage it all right."

"Same old Tillie, isn't it?" remarked the boy with a broadening smile. "As soon as Dad and I got here this afternoon I went out in the kitchen to see her, and she showed me where she keeps the cooky-jar.

"But, say," he went on hastily, "I haven't lived with a mother and four sisters for nothing. I *know* a fruit-stain comes out better when you take it fresh. The teakettle is just ready to boil. You get the dress."

The words were peremptory, but his manner of saying them was sufficiently beguiling to make

Susan give up her own way. As she went upstairs, she asked herself why she should meekly obey this boy; she felt that she ought to assert her independence and had half a mind to go down without the dress. Instead she did just as he told her, and then helped him to hold the stained portion over a pan while he poured boiling water through it.

"There! Now, being white, all we've got to do is to hang it somewhere to dry. Is that old clothes-horse we used to dry our wet duds on still out in the back room?"

"Robert Bruce, do you remember every single thing we had while you were here?" Susan's face showed her amazement. "Why, that was five years ago." She led the way into a small back room. "There, that's a new one."

"Too bad. I'd counted on meeting all my old friends. Well, I refuse to get fond of this new one." Robert pulled his face into an unbelievable solemnity, but his eyes twinkled. "Now, Mademoiselle, that's spread out to my satisfaction. Let's get dinner. Where's an apron for me?"

Susan was thinking fast on her way back to the kitchen. She felt that now was the time to assert herself or forever after meekly submit. What should she do about it? Send him off into the living-room while she got dinner? No, that would deprive her of his help and he really seemed very

handy. Oh, well, after the dishes were washed—Susan usually planned with an eye to her own comfort—she would make him understand how much she hated being ordered around.

It suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't asked him how he had happened to come back, and at that moment, by common impulse, they faced each other.

"Why ——?" she began.

"Who ——?" he asked.

They laughed and waited a moment. Then both together ——

"What made ——?" she demanded.

"Who's the ——?" he questioned.

"You win," he went on resignedly. "I'm mum."

"I was just trying to ask how you happened to come back." By this time Susan was beginning her preparations for dinner and doing her best to look as if she did this often. It never would do to let Robert Bruce think she didn't know how.

"Why that old 'bus we hired to bring us out got a puncture when we were about half-way back to the city; and while the man was fixing it—Dad was overseeing, of course—I found out that Cousin Jean was feeling uncomfortable because you had been left behind."

"Was she, really?" Susan interrupted involun-

tarily. She was convinced that if she had been in her mother's place she should have considered it a good chance to pay off a shirking daughter. There were times when Susan was very honest with herself.

"And so I said," Robert Bruce went on—"here, I'll husk the corn—you do something else—that is, I didn't say that to your mother, but I did propose that I should take the trolley and come out and get you and meet them at the hotel."

"Get me!" Susan dropped with a clatter the knife with which she was about to peel the tomatoes. "Get me! Then why are we wasting time here? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Don't be excited," counseled Robert with exasperating calmness. He picked up the knife from the floor, rinsed it under the faucet and put it into her hand which seemed to hate to take it. "You may as well go on; this story comes out wrong.

"When I suggested that," he went on, "Cousin Jean was delighted, and we went into a drug store to telephone Rose. We wanted to ask her to come to the hotel, too. But she had left the office on business and wouldn't be back this afternoon. And your mother said of course you wouldn't be willing to have her come home to an empty house and no dinner—Rose, I mean."

"Oh," murmured Susan, and tried not to show

her real anguish. It was such a joy to her to lunch or dine in the city. She wished Motherje wouldn't always expect her to feel just the way *she* did about everything. Rose could have telephoned someone —she could have got along perfectly well by herself—she wouldn't have minded—Susan knew she wouldn't.

"I thought it was quite a compliment to have her so sure of you," Robert went on with apparent unconcern, so absorbed in the husking of the last ear of corn that he did not look at Susan. "I'm afraid I shouldn't have stopped to think about someone else if I'd wanted to go."

"Motherje's always getting ahead of me that way," Susan said petulantly. "It isn't easy when someone puts you on a pedestal to fall off and disappoint them. I'm always doing what I haven't the slightest intention of doing, just because Motherje's such a darling dear."

"I know what you mean. I'm sometimes that way, myself, about my father. It's awfully hard on a chap to have anyone expect so much of him." Brucey's air was meditative as he painstakingly removed the silken strings still clinging to the corn. "There! Now what shall I do with all this—this huskery?"

"Take an old newspaper from here"—Susan indicated the spot with her elbow, since both hands

were busy—" then you can put it in the little back room and Tillie will take care of it. You really should have spread the newspaper on the table first." She ended with an air of superiority; it did her good to be able to teach him something.

" Right you are. I thought of that when I got about half-way through. Glad I can clear up my own mess, though, when I do a fool thing like that."

While her assistant busied himself Susan's spirit went below zero and fought its way back again. It did seem too hard that she should have so big a punishment for what seemed to her so slight an offense. Nevertheless she did not blame her mother in the least. The whole trouble lay in a combination of unfortunate circumstances: why had she slipped away to-day of all days? Why hadn't she told Motherje where she was going or called her up from Edith's, or—or something? Why hadn't they telephoned Rose earlier? Why—anyway, all there was to do now was to get the best dinner she could and pretend she didn't mind.

" There! That's off my mind. What shall I do next? My mother says I've always got to be kept busy or I get into mischief."

" Well, if you really want to help, you can find a big kettle in the closet and start the water heating for the corn. Only, first, what were you going to

ask me when we interrupted each other a little while ago? You got as far as 'who.'"

"Oh, I wanted to know who the boy is who showed me the way here. Would you believe it? When I got off the car I was all turned 'round. He happened to be the one I asked, and we walked along together. Nice chap! I liked him."

"Oh, did you?" There was that in Susan's tone which made Robert pause on his way to the closet and look at her sharply. "I don't know his name. They've been here only a little while and they don't seem to want to know anyone."

"Well, I liked him," Robert repeated. He had heard persons speak in that tone before, and to him it always meant an unspoken criticism of the person to whom they referred. When his older sisters acted like that he called them snobs; when his younger sisters tried it he pronounced them snippy. Was Susan one of the snippy kind? "Anyway, he was nice to me," he said at last, "and he seemed to know just who you were—said he didn't know Jim, though."

"They'd only been here a week or two before Jimsey went away."

"Oh, that explains. Of course if Jim had been here he would have made friends with him before this." Robert Bruce started for the closet again and this time attained his goal.

Susan had begun on the cucumbers and she went on peeling and slicing with precision. Susan's hands were capable ones, with fingers slender, well-shaped, and strong.

"Brucey," she said, after a little silence, "I don't believe you like girls any better than you used to. Anyway, you like boys heaps better, don't you?"

"Oh, I do—I mean I do like girls. I think they're very—very—well, very useful things to have around," ended Robert Bruce with a chuckle that banished his embarrassment. "I—I wouldn't say I liked boys a *heap* better," he added, and the perplexity of his expression made him seem like one who strove to be entirely honest.

"Well, you needn't try to measure it. I can tell you haven't changed a mite."

"Oh, but I have," the boy contradicted. "I'm awfully fond of my sisters now. Why Miggs and I—she's the one next younger, you know, are regular pals. I shall write her how nice you look in that dress and tell her just how it's made."

"Is she anywhere near my size? I'll send her the pattern of this if you think she'd like it. I made this myself." Susan tossed this off as carelessly as if she attached not the slightest importance to such a performance, but inwardly she was sure an achievement like this would count with Brucey.

"Like it! I should say she would. She'd look cute in it, too. But do you really mean you made a nifty dress like that?" His tone held a proper reverence for such skill.

"Oh, yes. It isn't so hard to make dresses nowadays." From her manner no one would have guessed that this was Susan's only experience in dressmaking and that she was keenly enjoying the impression she was making.

"You sound"—Brucey's voice was low and full of awe—"you sound as if you made the dress with one hand and played the piano with the other. I shall write Miggs just how smart you are. Perhaps it will encourage her to try to do more."

Susan looked at him searchingly. "I believe you're making fun of me," she said uncertainly. "I've a great mind to write to Miggs, myself, and tell her not to believe a word you say about me."

"Do. She'd love it. Say, what can I be doing now to help?"

"Do you know how to cook chops? I'll let you do that," answered Susan, generously assigning to him the part she most disliked. "I'm going to set the table now. Oh, there's Rose coming. And she's got someone you know with her. Guess who it is."

Robert Bruce, turning to the window, took a pro-

longed look at the pretty girl in brown and white gingham, and the young man who accompanied her.

"Whoopee! It's my Cousin Neil Ramsay! Dad and I were going to hunt him up." The boy dashed through the dining-room and out of the house in excited greeting. For him kinship held a peculiar thrill, and even a third-cousinship meant a great deal.

"Neil called up the office and I made him come out to dinner with us," explained Rose as soon as the first greetings were over. "But, of course, I never remembered that it was Tillie's day out. I hope Motherje ——"

"She and Daddy are dining in town with Cousin Robert Bruce," explained Susan, enjoying the look of consternation on Rose's face; and then, relenting, "come on out in the kitchen and see if I've started things right. We'll let Brucey and Neil get acquainted over again."

"I'm going to cook the chops, mind you," called Robert, as he and his cousin went into the living-room. "I'm not going to lose such a chance as that to show off."

Rose led the way to the kitchen. "I hope we've got enough," she said anxiously. "If Connie were only here she could make something out of nothing, but ——" she broke off to survey the supplies on

the table. "Why, Susan, you've done wonders. I didn't expect ——"

"I suppose Tillie's left a fresh cake," Susan interrupted coolly. "I haven't looked, but she usually does." All of a sudden it struck her that it was very uncomplimentary to have so little expected of her. Now, if it had been Connie, Rose would have felt perfectly at ease if several unexpected guests had arrived.

In the joy of her relief Rose took her sister by the shoulders and gazed at her. "You're a good-looking youngster," she said approvingly, "and you can be real smart when you try, can't you? Would you like that blue tunic of mine? I believe it would be more becoming to you than to me—anyway, you may have it if you like."

"I should say I would. And there isn't much more to do now—I believe I can finish if you want to change your dress. It wasn't nearly as difficult as I expected."

"No, I'm going to help." Rose was tying on an apron as she spoke. "It really seems good to do something of this kind after being in an office all day." With her usual quickness Rose swept things to completion, not even giving Robert Bruce the chance to show his skill in cooking.

"Not that I mind so much," he conceded when they sat down to a very good dinner. "It's

awfully interesting to meet Cousin Neil again. I didn't realize that he's a—a full-fledged doctor."

Rose laughed. "Lots of changes since you visited us, Robert: Anne and Archie married and the proud parents of the most wonderful child on earth; Roger, an architect; Connie on the way to being a landscape gardener; I'm a private secretary in a big business office."

"And Ellis and Ellen are married and abroad," put in Susan quickly. She couldn't bear to have Ellis omitted. "What a pity you didn't get here before they went."

"I always did think Ellis was the best ever," Robert said, thereby scoring a point with Susan. "You know Cousin Ellen was away when I was here with Uncle Duncan. Glory! There's someone I can hardly wait to see. Cousin Jean says he's going to live with you. You're in luck."

"Of course we are," answered Susan. "You should have let us know you were coming so that we could arrange to have the family here."

"Dad took it into his head all of a sudden to come on here and put me in school," explained Robert. "And now he's here, everyone's telling him he can't get me into one of the best unless I was entered years ago. Funny, isn't it?"

"They say you have to be entered when you're born," Rose answered. "Why don't you try our

High School? Jim's preparing for college, you know. We do those things very well here, even if it is a suburban town."

"Then you could live with us," added Susan. "I'll introduce you to all the girls and boys and ——" the rest of her remark was lost in the distance as she went into the kitchen for hot corn.

"I'm sure it's awfully good of you even to think of having me," murmured Robert Bruce, looking as if he found this idea rather startling. He still had the friendly smile that Rose remembered from five years ago, but his face was less freckled and his hair not so upstanding. His manners were nice, and she thought him rather a charming youngster.

"You must come to us for the short vacations, anyway," she said decidedly. "Jim will want to see you, and he and Susan have some nice friends."

"Oh, Jim! When I think of him it makes me almost wish my father couldn't get me into a prep school. What's good enough for Jim will do me," young Robert responded with fervor.

And just then the telephone rang, an insistent peal, and Susan went to answer it.

"It was Daddy," she said on her return to the table. "They've had dinner, and your father, Brucey, is coming out here with them and take you back. Daddy said to tell you that your father has a new plan for you."

"Now what, I wonder," young Robert murmured resignedly. "My father's the greatest man for suddenly getting a new plan and putting it through like lightning. Anyway, I hope he'll come out in a better car this time. We can take you in with us if you like, Cousin Neil."

After all the new plan proved to be the one that, by some mysterious telegraphy, had seemed to flash between their minds at dinner-time. It seemed greatly to relieve the anxiety of Robert Bruce, the elder, that his son should find a home with kinsfolk and begin on college preparation with Jim. At the same time he could be entered in some of the preparatory schools, and there would be a place for him later on.

Young Robert looked somewhat dazed as he said good-night to them all. "I'm awfully pleased and—and a little sorry, too," he confessed honestly in answer to a challenging remark from Susan. "I'd been rather counting on prep school with a lot of boys and games."

"You can have that here," Susan responded. "I dare say you can make the football team. And I'll see that the girls don't bother you." She ended with a toss of her head that pleased Robert Bruce, Senior.

"That's right, Susan. You teach this boy of mine what's what, and I shall be greatly obliged to

you. He needs to have his ideas changed about certain things. Well, we must be going. Come on, Neil; we'll have our visit on the way to the city."

As he said good-night her father put his arm around Susan. "Rose says you had a nice dinner almost ready when she got here. Good for you, Miss Girl; I'm proud of you. We shall have to let Connie know that she isn't the only one who can do things like that."

Susan loved him for saying that, and hugged him with such force that he groaned.

"My child! Your muscles are like iron!" He wriggled his head feebly. "It does move, doesn't it? That's something to be thankful for. I wish you'd go out and mow the lawn just before I get home, and work off some of your surplus energy before you squeeze a little delicate thing like me."

Susan laughed and hugged him again; this time with remorseful tenderness. "Poor little Daddy! Did his great strong daughter hurt him?"

Being a young person of few concealments, she felt she ought to tell her father that she really did not deserve the praise he had given her, but she hated to do so.

"Didn't—didn't Motherje tell you——" she began haltingly, and sighed with relief because Rose claimed his attention at that moment. She

was half-sorry, half-glad to go off to bed without saying anything more.

Evidently Motherje had not told him, she was thinking, as she got into bed after brushing her hair with a fidelity which seemed partly to make up for other shortcomings. Though she would have hated to be told so, she looked like a cherubic child, as she lay with her curly yellow hair making a halo around her rosy face.

Motherje not only had not told, but she had not even looked as if her feelings had been hurt. Susan had avoided meeting her eye when she first got home, and had somehow managed to escape having any moments alone with her. But once, when they had turned to each other in frank enjoyment of something Brucey had said, there had been no shadow of hurt in Motherje's lovely brown eyes.

Susan had a sudden fierce impulse to get up this minute and tell her mother what a trump she was, and that she, Susan, realized what a caddish, little-girl trick it had been to slip away from the house without telling, when she knew—she very well knew—she might be wanted. And then, just as she was about to jump out of bed, she heard her father coming along the hall talking to someone, and the next moment Motherje came into her room and across to the bed.

"Have you a comforter, Susan, dear?" she asked

at once. "There's a real chill in the air to-night; Daddy says it feels like a frost." She bent over Susan and kissed her good-night for the second time. "Wasn't it fine, darling, to see my cousins?"

"Lovely! Oh, Mummy"—which was Susan's own pet name for her mother, and used only in moments of deep feeling—"sit down on the bed, please, and let me tell you something." Susan, seldom demonstrative, cuddled one of her mother's hands against her cheek, and waited for inspiration. It was hard for her to confess her shortcomings.

"Mother, I——" a long pause—"I'm rather glad Brucey's going to be with us, aren't you?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm very glad. And Cousin Robert is so much happier to leave him here."

"And Jim will be glad."

"Connie and Uncle Duncan, too, when they hear about it. We shall be a glad family, shan't we?" laughed Motherje. "Was that what you wanted to tell me, dear?"

"No-o. It's just that I'm sorry I went off to-day without letting you know—it was sneaky of me. I should think you'd be pleased, because I got so well punished for it."

"Punished?" There was a perplexed sound in Motherje's voice.

"Why, yes. I had to lose going to the hotel for dinner—you know how I love it? Didn't you—

didn't you feel just a little bit glad I had to lose that?"

Mother's answer came promptly. "Not the least little bit. I was sorry Tillie should lose part of her time—I hope you weren't very late, dear,—and it was a disappointment not to have you with us. I'll confess I was glad that no one except yourself deprived you of the pleasure. I shouldn't be human if I didn't feel that way, should I?"

"Anyone would feel that way." Susan's voice was muffled by Mother's hand which she was holding across her lips. "I *was* late—Tillie wouldn't even look at me when she went out. Do you know, I think you ought to punish me sometimes."

Mother laughed. "Oh, my dear, when one reaches your age and knows she *ought* to be disciplined she has to attend to it herself. You can't shirk responsibility, Susan, and make up for what you've done by being punished."

"I s'pose not," Susan answered dolefully, and after Motherje had gone she lay there staring into the darkness, trying to hold on to the feeling of tender arms about her.

"Well," she said to herself at last, snuggling her cheek into the pillow and shutting her eyes, "life was certainly much simpler when I was young. Then—when I was put in the closet or sent to bed—it wiped my conscience clean."

CHAPTER IV

"BOYS ARE SO QUEER"

SUSAN was helping her mother put last touches to the room for Jim and Robert Bruce, who were to arrive that day and to meet each other for the first time in five years. The hour of arrival was uncertain, as Jim was coming by automobile with some boys and a camp councillor, and Robert would appear as soon as possible after his father left the city.

"I suppose Brucey will go into the class above mine," Susan said, as she made up a bed with a precision that pleased her mother. "I'm sorry, because that will make him look down on me even more than he does now."

"He really doesn't; he only wants to make you believe he does. Susan, when you try to do a thing well you certainly succeed."

"What do you mean?" Susan stopped work for a moment in her surprise. "Oh—making a bed? Well, I hate to see them look all—all slouchy—with wrinkles—and not tucked in at the bottom. I'm fussy about bed-making."

"I don't call that fussy. To me it seems being properly respectful to the business in hand."

Susan blinked. "That makes it sound very toploftical, but I suppose all it means is doing the thing as well as you can," she murmured, and felt a deep satisfaction, which she took pains to conceal, in having her good points made the topic of conversation.

"Do you know, Mummy," she went on, quite unwilling to let this interesting subject drop, "though I'm a slacker about doing things, I do like to do them well when I do do them."

She clung to the bed-post exhaustedly and fanned herself with a clean pillow-case. "One more 'do' would have finished me. It isn't easy to do them right.

"But you know what I mean, Mummy," she went on as she patted the pillows into shape. "I haven't any use for lopsided or crooked things. Now there's Edith—I don't mean she's lopsided—but she's taken lessons in basket-making, and I've never seen a single basket of hers that would sit flat or stand straight. Does that worry her? Not a little bit. She keeps right on making them and giving them away. Also bags that never will draw up, and collars that don't fit."

"How does Edith get on in athletics and lessons?" asked Motherje, who was busy at the other end of the room.

"Oh, she never really tries in the games—just

flops around. I hate to play with her—or against her."

"You must admit she plays the violin well," said Motherje. "That takes a great deal of work."

"Well, why shouldn't she? She's taken lessons ever since she could hold a bow." There was a stubborn note in Susan's voice; she liked to prove her point. "Of course, when she feels like it, she can play so that your spine feels chillsome. But she will not practise unless she happens to want to. Now I haven't a millionth part of her talent, but I do manage to worry the piano a little every day." Susan stood off and surveyed the smooth bed with a virtuous air plainly apparent.

"And lessons?" Motherje repeated this part of her previous question as if something really vital depended on Susan's answer.

"Well, she slides along." Susan smoothed an imaginary wrinkle and avoided looking at her mother. She had an uneasy feeling that she, herself, was being put unexpectedly on the defense. Suddenly she looked up and met Motherje's smile. "I suppose you're wanting to say that's just the way I do," she ended in a tone that wasn't altogether pleasant.

"I was wishing you had as high a standard for studies as you have for games and—and bed-making."

"What do you mean by standard?" Susan sat down and stared at her mother gloomily. She was conscious that she had walked unsuspiciously into a trap from which it would be hard to wriggle out.

"Why, standards form a sort of measure according to which we build our lives," Motherje said slowly. She had stopped what she was doing and had come over to Susan's end of the room.

"It's just about what you've been saying," she went on. "You admit that you like to make beds as well as they can be made: that is your standard for bed-making. And when you put your best work into tennis, for instance, you have a higher standard for the game than a girl who waits for the ball to come into her racquet, and makes no effort to improve her service or her general play."

"Yes, but it's my nature to want to do well the things I like," murmured Susan. "Oh, of course, I'm not crazy about bed-making, but there's something—something in me that hates a slouchy-looking bed. I don't call that having standards, though," she ended stubbornly.

"I should call it that," answered Motherje and disappointingly stopped.

"I suppose you think," Susan went on after a moment of silence, "you think I have a low standard for school-work." She hated to say this, and

there was a hint of resentment in her voice because something had forced her to do so.

"I didn't say so, but what do you think about it yourself?" Motherje smiled, but the next instant her voice and eyes were so earnest that Susan involuntarily sat straighter.

"Oh, Susan, there are many born into such wretchedness that their pattern of life can't help being a poor one, but you, with your harmonious home, and such a mother and father haven't any excuse of that kind."

"And with you, too, Mummy, darling. But somehow"—Susan paused and frowned perplexedly—"somehow it seems priggish to hold out against doing things other people think are perfectly right. And you hate to be called a dig at school."

"I'd risk that last just to see how it would feel. And, Susan, if you were doing a piece of embroidery you wouldn't spoil it by putting in a discordant color even if someone else did think it belonged there."

"No-o. I s'pose not. Of course I see what you mean, and when you're talking to me I truly want to do what you say. But it's very, very easy to forget about—about standards." Susan's blue eyes, fixed on her mother's brown ones, grew dark in their appeal for sympathy.

"Well, it's going to be hard from now on," responded Motherje, smiling at her exultantly and holding her gaze. "I've magicked you, Susan, darling. You're not going to be able to forget after this that high standards belong to you by inheritance and training, and that you can't lower them nor lose them without injuring the pattern of your life. That's going to stick in your mind. And now, dear, are you quite satisfied with the furniture in this room?"

"Why—why I think so." Susan was startled by the abrupt change of subject. "No, I'm really not satisfied," she added quickly. "I think there should be another desk; boys collect such a lot of truck. There's an old desk in the attic; it wouldn't match the rest of the furniture, but no boy would mind that."

"There's plenty of space for it, too." Motherje's voice was enthusiastic; no one would have guessed that a moment before she had been skillfully leading the conversation in another direction. "Do you suppose you can get someone to come in and move the desk?"

"Why, yes. And wouldn't it be nice to bring down that old couch from the attic?" Susan, emboldened by her first success, was gazing about the room critically. "Somehow these chairs look rather stiff and—and slim for a boy's room."

"That's a good suggestion. You and I can make some cushions for it. Ever since Ellis went away I've been meaning to dress up this room for Jimsey. Can you think of anything else?"

Susan mentally put the couch in place and added the extra desk; then she surveyed the room. "Well, perhaps a table—one with leaves that let down. Probably they'll want to play chess or dominoes, and they're sure to like to spread out stamp-books. Of course Brucey collects something. But I'll tell you one thing: I shouldn't dare to make cushions for Jimsey without consulting him—he's so fussy about colors."

Mrs. Sheldon laughed. "We'll let him and Robert choose the colors. And I dare say you won't find a table in the attic—of the kind you want, I mean. I believe I'll buy one for the boys if they think they'd like it."

"Just wait," begged Susan, the light of conquest in her eyes, "until I can look in the attic. It's a perfect treasure-house. I'm sure there are things tucked away under the eaves that you've never even seen."

A half-hour later she came down-stairs, smudgily adorned with dust, but enveloped in an atmosphere of triumph. "They're all there," she announced, "even the table. It's not very large and it lets down at the ends, and you can put in an

extra leaf. To be sure I can't find any leaves, but I shall—you just watch me. Now I'm going to find someone to move the things."

She looked so much as though she were going to walk straight out of the house that Motherje caught her by the arm and pulled her in front of a mirror.

"Like this?" she inquired with impressive sternness.

Susan chuckled, and with a deliberate finger prolonged the smooch on her upper lip into a moustache.

"Kiss me, Madam," she made fierce demand, and then, in her most wheedlesome way, "you think I'm a nice little daughter, don't you, darlingest, even if I—if I haven't any standards?"

"Oh, but you have," demurred Motherje. "No one brought up in this family could be without them."

"But if I don't know I have 'em," Susan protested, and then was out of the room in a flash. "I'll wash up and find someone to move those things," she called back clearly.

Doing this took more time and effort than she had anticipated; nevertheless she accomplished it, and at two o'clock, she and Motherje called their work finished and surveyed the result with satisfied eyes.

"I wouldn't for anything miss seeing Jimsey

when he first walks in here," Susan remarked, as they both stood in the doorway. "Of course it isn't anything wonderful, I know, but Jimsey will like it."

"Robert will, too."

"Yes, but he won't know the difference; there won't be any surprise for him. My, but I'm tired! And so sleepy I could go off standing up."

"I don't wonder. It's warm and you hurried around so long after the moving man. Why don't you have a little nap after you've taken your bath? I think I shall."

Susan shook her head. "Jimsey might come and I've got to see him have his first look," she asserted sleepily.

"I couldn't miss hearing the automobile—and I never sleep more than ten minutes. Anyway, I'll ask Tillie to call us at half-past three if we're not down before that," urged Motherje. "You'll want to be fresh and wide-awake to hear all that Jimsey has to tell."

"Well, a bath may wake me, but if it doesn't ——" Susan let a yawn finish her sentence and then smiled sleepily at her mother. "If I weren't so dirty I should kiss you," she murmured. "Rose always used to make Jim and me wash our faces before we kissed her."

"You can't feel any more so than I do."

Motherje gave her a quick kiss and pushed her in the direction of her bedroom. "Now a tubbing and a little sleep and you'll be ready for anything."

After awhile the house became very still. Tillie, in the tidy kitchen, put her head against the back of the rocking-chair and took at least three times forty winks. She always insisted that the lightest footfall would waken her, but this afternoon she slept more soundly than usual.

Susan, pink-cheeked from her bath, half-woke once from a dream of having left the bath-water turned on; she fancied she could still hear it running. Then with a deep breath she fell into slumber again. As for Motherje her boasted ten minutes prolonged itself indefinitely. It was not until Tillie bustled up-stairs at half-past three that she woke and called Susan.

"It's lucky nothing happened, isn't it?" yawned Susan. "I'll hustle now." A promise which she made good so faithfully that she was out on the front porch ten minutes before Motherje appeared.

"I'm straining my eyes trying to see the automobile," she grumbled. "I thought I heard it and I tore down-stairs; and now I don't want to leave even for a minute because he'd be sure to come. You don't believe, do you, that he could possibly be staying over another day?"

"No. He would have managed to let us know

in some way; Jimsey's so thoughtful about us all." Motherje was decided in her opinion, but Susan shook her head.

"Boys are queer; you never know when they're going to change their manners," she observed gloomily. Then her attention was drawn to the end of the street where a car was stopping. "I do believe that's Brucey getting out of the car. Now, he's earlier than I expected him to be."

"Has Jim got here yet?" inquired Robert Bruce, a little later as he came up the path laden with a suit-case and a smaller bag, with camera-case slung from his shoulders and golf-sticks under his arm. "Don't I look like a station-porter? I thought of getting a red cap to go with the rest of it." He dropped everything in the path and sitting down on the steps wiped his face. "I was sure my Dad would offer me a free taxi-ride out here, but the idea seemed to escape his notice."

"Jim hasn't got here yet," Susan said disappointedly. "I'm so anxious to see what he does when he discovers you and—and other things, that I can hardly wait."

"He's got one big surprise due him." Robert was zealously scrubbing his hands with his handkerchief. "It's astonishing how soiled one does get even in a nice, clean trolley-car."

"You'd like to go up to your room, wouldn't

you, Robert? Susan and I will help you take up your—your portable property," said his Cousin Jean.

Susan jumped up, took the golf-clubs and the smaller bag and led the way.

"Is it Jim's old room?" asked Brucey. "I could go to it with my eyes shut; and you really don't need to carry anything." He felt so much at home that he would have been glad to prove it by going alone, but he stepped aside to let Mrs. Sheldon, carrying the camera, precede him.

Susan, walking erectly before the others, had a mental picture of the room as she last saw it—fresh curtains fluttering in the breeze from the garden, everything clean and tidy—she wondered if boys ever noticed things of that kind, and half-fancied Brucey might be one of the boys who would. Perhaps, after all, it was just as well that he should see it now, for Jim, family joy that he was, could always be relied on to leave a room less neat than he found it.

With this thought in mind her eye discovered even before she reached the door, a bath towel, partly in the room and partly out. She could not remember having a bath towel in the room at all! Her involuntary pause brought Motherje and Robert Bruce to the door at the same moment, and they entered almost together.

The fresh curtains were still blowing in the garden breeze, but that was the only thing that seemed the same to Susan. There was a bundle of camp blankets on one bed and an armful of golden-rod and asters on the other; shoes and various other articles of clothing reposed on the floor; fishing rod and tackle were threateningly near the edge of the bureau, and a paper bag, full of apples, occupied one chair. On the couch, which Susan had adorned with one of the best cushions just for the home-coming, lay Jimsey, his fair hair bleached and his skin darkened by the sun. He was such a picture of peaceful comfort no heart could withstand him, and with one impulse the three invaders tiptoed softly out of the room, and spoke no word until they were safely in Motherje's sitting-room.

"Well, what do you think of that?" gasped Brucey, setting down his suit-case.

"It wasn't a dream; I really did hear water running," muttered Susan irrelevantly.

"He came home and found us all asleep, so he took a bath and went to sleep, too. He's such a dear," said Motherje, who had a very tender heart for Jimsey. "We couldn't wake him, of course."

"Oh, couldn't we? One swift, sure tug at his hair!" Susan surveyed her mother gloomily. "You talk as if you were proud of him. The only reason I worked so hard was so that I could see how

surprised he would look when he saw that room—and now he's spoiled everything."

"Not everything; I'm here to be surprised," protested Robert Bruce. "I thought the room looked fine."

"Goose! It was dreadful. Anyway you wouldn't be expected to notice the special improvements because you don't know how it looked before."

"Well, I suppose you've changed it a dozen times since I stayed here, but then it didn't have a couch, and there was only one desk and a small table, not like the one you have now."

"Why, those are the very things I've changed. Brucey, you're a wonder! Do you remember everything like that?" Susan gazed at him with respect; her own mind did not make such lasting pictures.

"Why—I don't know——" he began, but a whoop from the doorway startled them.

"Oh, hello! Hello! Well, if it isn't Brucey, by all that's wonderful!" Jim, clad in his bathrobe, with his tousled hair standing out in all directions, swooped down on his friend and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Hello, Mother, darling; I'm tickled to death to see you. Susan, how goes it?

"I thought I heard voices," he went on when he had hugged his mother and Susan. "When I got

into the house it seemed like the enchanted castle in one of those old fairy stories: Tillie, asleep in her chair and very musical; Motherje on her couch, and Susan with her mouth open ——"

"I was not—I never sleep with my mouth open," Susan interrupted indignantly.

"You can't prove it by me. I thought it must be the rule of the house to sleep at this time so I took a nap for a few minutes myself."

"Few minutes!" His sister's voice was raised in scornful protest. "Few minutes! You must have been asleep an hour and a half. And we all went into your room and it looked as if—as if it had never been in order."

"That must have been what woke me—the disorder, I mean," observed Jim, quite unabashed. "I did drop a few things 'round. I didn't wake Mother, because I was too dirty to kiss her until my face had been washed, so I just tumbled into the tub and on the couch."

His mother laughed. "We must tell Rose that her former teaching has lasted even to this day." Her voice was full of pride and she regarded this tall son proudly.

"Mother! You spoil him! Where did you say you tumbled when you finished your bath, Jimsey?"

"On the couch," repeated Jim, with an utter

lack of response to the significance of his sister's tone. "Say, Brucey, when did you come? I hope you're going to stay with us a long, long time."

"He's going to stay all winter and share your room and go to High," explained Susan hastily. "We were just taking him up to wash his hands when we found you."

"That's the nicest news I've heard for a long time. Come right along with me," Jim said, eagerly hospitable. "I'll chuck some of my things into the attic and make room for you. Ellis left some things in his bureau; where shall I put 'em, Mother? We'll get the room fixed up in no time."

"Oh, foolish!" stormed Susan, and then laughed in spite of herself at Jim's perplexed face. "Don't you suppose we've taken care of all that? Go along and pick up your own duds and then see what you'll see."

"Well, I seem to be in wrong some way," said Jim, looking puzzled; and then, with sudden determination, seizing the suit-case, "Come on, Brucey. We'll sleuth this out and get to the bottom of this mystery which is poisoning our young lives."

When they were out of hearing Susan turned to her mother. "Hear me make a vow, Mummy. Never again shall I try to surprise that brother of mine. He either finds it out before I'm ready, or

he doesn't know a surprise when he sees it. I'm through!" Her face was sober, and she evidently meant what she said.

"Oh, Susan, it's a delicious joke. The innocence of his expression when you made him repeat 'on the couch!'" Motherje's eyes danced and her gleeful laugh bubbled out. "Oh, Susan, can't you see it's funny and enjoy it even if the joke is on you?"

"No, I can't. There's nothing funny in having anyone so—so blind and ungrateful when I've worked so hard." She was still stubbornly unresponsive.

"If you could only forget yourself for awhile, perhaps you'd see the other side of it," sighed Motherje. "You seem fated to miss a lot of good times if you can't."

"How can I forget myself when I'm right here to be remembered?" questioned Susan. "Anyway, Jimsey might have some sense and see what other people have done for him." By this time she was feeling that she was really offended and quite properly so.

"Give him time," advised her mother, but the words were scarcely spoken when there was a roar from Jim's room, and the sound of approaching footsteps.

Even before the boys reached them they could

hear Jim quoting from the Jungle Book as he so often did.

"'Put dead bats on my head! Give me black bones to eat! For I am the most miserable of bears! Arulala! Wahooa!' Oh, I say, little mother, did you ever see such a blindy as I am? The couch and the desk and table are fine. Thank you! Thank you!"

By this time he was hugging her tightly, but she managed to gasp, "Susan! It was Susan who thought of it and did it!"

"Susan!" Jim stared in unaffected amazement. Then his long arms went around his sister. "Susanna, you're a peach. It almost takes my breath away to hear that you did that."

"Well, you're quite taking mine away." Susan wriggled out of his grasp and eyed him solemnly. "I don't see why you should be surprised just because I did it," she went on in an offended tone. "It isn't much of a compliment—and right before Brucey, too. He'll get a nice idea of me."

"Oh, well, of course I'm used to having Mother do nice things for me. You don't usually get much time, you know." Jim stopped to enjoy the clever way he was getting out of trouble, and then spoiled it all the next instant. "You don't need to worry about my giving Brucey ideas. He remembers you perfectly, and he was just saying you hadn't

changed a bit ——" something in his sister's expression made Jimsey see that he had blundered again. "It's a great old room now," he went on hopefully. "That was a dandy idea of yours. I guess I'll go back and finish picking up my belongings. Come on, Bruce."

Susan started for her own room the moment they were out of sight, but turned in the doorway. "I thought I couldn't wait for Jimsey to get here," she said in a troubled voice, "and now he's put me in bad humor the first minute."

She took a step or two along the hall, but returned immediately. "Boys are so queer," she remarked, putting in her head far enough to gaze somberly at Motherje who had seated herself at her desk. "You never know what they are going to say or do or not do." Then she vanished again.

Ten minutes later a young hurricane blew into the room and startled Mrs. Sheldon into dropping a blot on the letter she was writing.

"Oh, Motherje, I'm so sorry. Here! This nice clean blotter will drink it up for you. I simply couldn't wait to show you this." Susan laid her line a day book under her mother's gaze.

"Look! You've 'magicked' me all right. What you said about standards popped into my mind, and the more I tried to forget it the closer it stuck. So I put this into my diary."

Motherje read it aloud: " Standard! Laugh at a funny happening even when the joke is on you! "

" Susan, that's fine. I'm willing to blot my letter for the sake of that. And it was funny, wasn't it? "

" Funniest thing I ever knew," Susan averred. " But do you know, Mummy, I still think boys are the queerest ever."

CHAPTER V

"GIRLS CERTAINLY ARE QUEER"

It was nearing the end of the first day in school after the long vacation, and the classes had been called together in the assembly-hall to listen to a short talk by the new head-master.

Susan, seated between two of her friends, looked about her at the higher classes and, for once, felt comparatively unimportant. It seemed a belittling change to be at the beginning of a school instead of in the graduating class as she had been last year.

She glanced across the room at the Juniors and found her brother. Evidently Jim was giving his whole mind to what Mr. Colby was saying, but Robert Bruce, sitting next to him, was studying faces and did not seem to be paying attention. Susan felt a renewal of resentment over the fact that Brucey had so easily entered Jim's class in spite of being only a year older than she.

Her gaze slid along and rested on the boy who lived in the bungalow on their street; Susan knew him now as the Marston boy. His steady eyes were fixed on Mr. Colby, and his face was sober. Susan thought he looked as though he had the world

on his shoulders; it was rather a relief to her that he had not climbed higher than her own class, though he looked as old as Brucey. He wouldn't be much fun, though, because he seemed not to want to know anyone. It was queer that his mother should have asked to be excused when Motherje called on her, and should never have returned the call.

Susan's thoughts ran on drowsily, lulled by the September air which blew through the room. It was too warm, too beautiful to be shut indoors, she told herself; she wished Mr. Colby would finish and let them go home.

A new tone, deep and compelling, in the speaker's voice brought her wandering attention back with a jerk.

"We come together in the school-building," Mr. Colby was saying, "but the school itself is an invisible structure built by successive pupils. If they lay a foundation of affection and loyalty, if they follow lofty ideals in building, and strengthen the walls with honest work and play, the school becomes for them a personality, its atmosphere of promise and achievement has a certain significance for the rest of their lives."

Susan squirmed uneasily. She resented having to listen to serious things which would, in spite of her, grip her mind. She had not thought of school

as signifying anything like this; to her it had meant something rather tedious, to be gone through with as easily as one could. Of course she intended to get sufficiently high marks to play on the school teams, but that was easy enough; she prided herself on being able to do anything she made up her mind to do. After all, there was something she liked in what Mr. Colby had just said. It made her think of talking with Motherje about standards. She wondered ——

"Wake up! We're dismissed," said Edith Lane, poking her with a sharp elbow, and Susan sat up with a start and followed Peggy Little who was on the other side of her.

Later, as the three of them walked home together, Frances Evans joined them. She was tall and fair and large for her age. She was younger than the rest of them, but spectacles gave her a serious air. She seemed to feel it her special duty to take care of Peggy, who was small, with short, dark hair and a confiding manner which appealed to Frances.

"Well, the same old thing is beginning again," Edith said discontentedly. "I don't know how I'm going to stand four years of it."

"Well, you don't have to stand it all at once," Frances said in her slow, serious manner.

"Bright child! I never should have thought of

that. I don't like it even in sections. And I must say I hate having teachers get up and lecture the way Mr. Colby did. I'm glad that's over."

"Don't be too sure. He's likely to do it again," laughed Peggy. "I love to have someone stir me up like that, and make me feel thrilly and full of good resolutions."

"Humph! Thrilly!" repeated Edith scornfully. "It would take something different from that to thrill me. My only comfort was that Susan was just as bored as I was. Weren't you, Honey?"

"No." Susan's answer came out with cold decision. She could scarcely have told why she always felt impelled to disagree with Edith. "At least, I didn't pay attention to all of it, but I liked that part where he told us that the building of the real school depended on us."

"Good for you," applauded Frances, and Peggy gave the hand nearest her a quick squeeze.

"Well, with three of you against me I seem to be out in the cold," Edith remarked with the utmost good-nature, "but I don't mind." It was impossible to argue with her when she made one of her quick changes of front. "I dare say you don't like those things any better than I do only you're afraid to say so. Are you coming over to play tennis with me this afternoon?"

"I'd like to, but I can't," Frances said decidedly. "I've promised to do some typing for Aunt Margaret, and she's in a hurry for it."

"Well, then, I suppose *you* can't, Peggy. You and Fran are just like—like button and buttonhole—one isn't any good without the other."

"Why don't you call us cup and saucer and then we'd be capable of something when we're apart." Frances shook her fair head in opposition. "No! I won't be called a button. I've got to have a separate existence and not be absolutely dependent on anyone."

"Dear me! How strong-minded we are. Are you coming, Peggy?"

"Can't. I've got to take care of the house and the children. Mother's going out this afternoon."

"Well, I'm thankful I can depend on Susan. She never does a disagreeable thing if she can slide out of it." They had reached the corner of separation by this time, Peggy and Frances turning in one direction, Edith in another, and Susan going straight ahead. "It's a shame you can't come, girls. Susan hates to play tennis with me. It hurts her disposition when she has to. I think it's horrid that you have to be kept in so often; there ought to be someone else to do those things."

"Oh, we don't mind," said Frances, looking at Peggy in an understanding way. And then, with

a sudden glint in her eye, " we sometimes think we'd be awfully bored if we weren't made to do some things—don't we, Peg? "

" Uh-huh," responded Peggy, with her shy, friendly smile, tucking her hand under Frances' arm. " We'll come some other time, Edie. Come on, Fran; I must hurry."

Edith watched them depart with an expression in which amazement and disapproval struggled. " You can't pry them apart, can you? " she said disgustedly. " I'm sure I don't know what they mean by being awfully bored by—anyway, Susan, I'm glad you're not queer the way they are. Anyone can tell you're not strong on giving up your own way, and doing things about the house. I know I get on better with selfish people than I do with self-sacrificing ones. What time will you be over? "

Color flamed in Susan's cheeks and she felt an instant revolt. She was tempted to say what was in her mind—the words were on the tip of her tongue, but she kept them back. This was just Edith's way. She should lose a lot of fun if she got Edith down on her; and, probably, not be able to use the tennis-court. Edith had been generous about that and had often let her have her choice about others to be invited. Susan realized that it added to her own popularity to be so intimate with

—with a tennis-court. And, of course, Edith hadn't meant what she had just said; she couldn't think those things about her and, apparently, like her so much.

"Oh, I don't know just when I can get there," she said hurriedly, noticing that Edith was staring at her with a queer expression. "Perhaps Mother may want me for something. I'll probably be around after awhile."

"Hurry up! I shall be waiting for you."

To Susan's ears there was a disagreeable note in Edith's voice. "Almost as if she owned me," she thought resentfully. It was queer about Edith—sometimes she seemed to be entirely under Susan's firm thumb, and then, unexpectedly, she'd slip out and Susan would have the irritated feeling that she, herself, was being managed, and that there was no way for her to stop it until Edith chose to let her. Oh, well, what was the use of worrying about things like this so long as one was having heaps of fun? And Susan meant always to have fun if possible.

She walked soberly on thinking of a bit of advice her father had given her the other day when she had said before him something of the same kind about Edith: that she often felt obliged to do what Edith wanted, because she could not afford to lose good times by offending her.

There had been something distinctly disapproving in Daddy's gaze as he looked up at her.

"Don't be a moral coward, Susan," he had said in that confidential way of his which took all his children into comradeship. "You're not a bit of a coward in any other respect."

Susan shrugged her shoulders over the remembrance that she had only just now let Edith's statements pass unchallenged. Oh, well, what was the use—and then she smiled welcomingly because Harley Snow was hopping toward her on his little crutch.

"Hello, Harley," she said in cheerful greeting. "All alone this afternoon?"

The neighborhood children regarded Susan as a boon companion and hailed her with delight. When she was in the mood for it she played games with them, made wonderful kites, and used her skilful fingers in various ways for their entertainment. On the other hand she never hesitated to send them away when she did not want them; a banishment which was usually accepted without resentment.

So now Harley grasped her unoccupied hand and tried to accommodate his swinging pace to her firm tread.

"No, I'm not alone; I'm with you," he corrected, "and before that I was with Jiggy Grant up by the

new house. We're building things with bricks. I saw you a long way off, and I tried to get her to come to meet you, but she wouldn't."

"She'll probably jump out at me from somewhere," Susan responded absently. "I'm glad you came, Harley." She gave his small hand a gentle squeeze.

"I had to come to take care of you; Mother says I've got to take care of all the girls and ladies 'cause I'm six years old to-day. I've got rid of that old five years." Not even the crutch could spoil the radiance of the smile he bestowed upon her.

"And Jiggy's still only five. That's very young, isn't it? I suppose you expect her to mind you now."

"Huh! I guess not! She never minds anyone. Those workmen have been sending her away from things all the afternoon, but every time she comes back. They've stopped now; I guess they think it isn't any use."

"Where are the men? I don't see them." By this time they were passing the tall fence put up at the front of the lot where the house was being built, and almost at the gateway which gave admittance.

"Oh, they're 'round at the back," explained Harley. "Jiggy went to find out what they were

doing, but I guess they didn't seem very glad to see her, 'cause she came back pretty quick."

They were turning in at the gateway now, and Susan was bracing herself against the probable onslaught of the energetic Jiggy whose chief delight was to startle an unsuspecting person.

Suddenly Harley gripped her hand and in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper said, "Look at Jiggy! On the ladder! Oh, she'll fall! She'll fall!"

Susan's eyes followed his pointing finger to a ladder the top of which rested on a second-story window-ledge. Half-way up was Jiggy, pausing, at the moment they looked, as if a little unsure of herself.

Susan's first instinct was to put both arms around Harley and prevent any further exclamation.

"Listen!" she said softly, "don't call to her or make a noise—she might fall—perhaps I can get some of the men ——" but even in the saying of this she knew it was useless. Jiggy might see her—would undoubtedly be startled if the men came running back.

What was that story Connie had read to her ages ago about a little girl, up on a ladder, and the mother, without saying a word, had jingled keys—keys that, to the child, meant always a gift of something good to eat. Susan could remember how she

used to feel as the little girl came step by step down the ladder. But she, herself, had no keys—nor anything else to take the place of them.

Suddenly she turned her back to the house and pulled Harley close, thus concealing the ladder from him.

"Ice-cream cones! How would you like to go and get an ice-cream cone, Harley?" she asked in a loud, cheerful voice which seemed to include a multitude in the invitation. "It's too bad Jiggy isn't here, too. Do you think she might come if we waited?"

"I—I guess she m-might," stammered the boy, shaking in Susan's grasp, but seeming at once to catch the idea.

"Perhaps if we stand still, with our eyes shut, Jiggy will come stealing up and scare me." Susan again spoke in her loudest voice, and then lowered it to say anxiously, "Harley, peek around me and see if she's started down."

After a cautious look, "Yes—she's coming," the boy responded almost in a whisper. And then, "O-ooh! She slipped—she can't find the place for her foot ——" his little body went so limp that Susan tightened her grasp. "N-now she's got her foot on again—she's standing still." Harley trembled with excitement and buried his head against Susan.

"Ice-cream!" Susan, as if shutting her eyes would help, squeezed her eyelids together, and lifted her voice in sturdy protest against fate. "Pink ice-cream would be very de-licious on a warm afternoon like this. If only Jiggy could be here to have some, too."

Harley shuddered and began to move his head.

"Don't look again just now," Susan continued in a soft murmur. "You know you've got to be brave because you're six. Probably the next time you peek she'll be nearly down. What kind of ice-cream do you like best, Harley? Pink or white?" For the question she changed to a clear, carrying tone which, she was sure, could be heard a mile away.

"P—pink!" answered Harley in what Susan afterwards described as a tearful roar. "I think Jiggy likes pink, too," he added in a valiant attempt to prove his courage.

"All right, sir. We'll find some pink—with nuts on it." Susan stopped—held her breath—fancied she heard a crackling sound behind her. The next instant she was almost thrown off her feet by the impact of a small, strong body, while a hearty voice assured her with emphasis, "*I* like white ice-cream best. Let's go and get banilla."

"Jiggy Grant!" Even in her excitement Susan

was gentle in freeing herself from Harley who stood, white and trembling, wondering what was going to happen to his favorite playmate.

"Jiggy Grant!" Susan had her by the shoulders now and she shook her a little to emphasize her words. "You're a naughty girl! Don't you know you've scared us to pieces? What made ——"

"B-but you said ice-cream—I heard you bery clearly—you—you said you wanted me to go with —with you and Harley." Jiggy rolled her eyes toward her playmate in sorrowful reproach. Had she given up the cherished desire of a lifetime, and come back for ice-cream only to be scolded, she was asking.

"I know I said ice-cream," Susan's voice and expression were full of righteous anger, "and I'm going to let you have ice-cream, but if I didn't have to keep my word I'd take you home to your mother and ask her to put you to bed." She looked sternly at Jiggy, who, reassured as to the ice-cream, smiled at her coaxingly. "If you belonged to me you shouldn't have anything nice to eat for—for a week."

"Huh! Glad I isn't your child. Come on, let's not talk about it; let's go." Jiggy slipped from Susan's grasp and flung an arm around Harley, nearly making him lose his balance.

"Come on, darling," she cooed. "Jiggy'll take you to have ice-cream."

Susan followed with a shrug. No one could make Jiggy mind so why should she try? She was thankful none of her family could see her trailing along after this spoiled child.

Just before they reached the gateway the Marston boy passed it, walking rapidly, and Susan thanked her lucky stars that he hadn't gone by a few minutes before. "What would he have thought if he had seen me with my eyes shut, hugging Harley and shouting about ice-cream? I *should* have been mortified. But then, he never looks anywhere but straight ahead."

A moment later she was waving her hand to the mothers of the two children, who were talking to each other from their adjoining porches.

"Ice-cream cones—do you mind?" she called, and had a faint hope that there might be some good reason for them to object. Now that Jiggy was safe Susan would gladly have been excused from taking her down-town and buying an ice-cream cone for her.

"We're delighted," Jiggy's mother answered effusively. "We always feel so comfortable about the children when they're with you. You're a real joy to us, Susan."

Susan smiled as heartily as she could, and told

SHE WAS WAVING HER HAND TO THE MOTHER OF THE TWO CHILDREN

herself that she did not want to be a joy to the neighborhood. She wished they would take care of their own children. And as for being safe, hadn't Jiggy come near to breaking her neck a few minutes ago? In spite of the warm sunshine Susan felt icy shivers run down her back when she thought of it. She hoped the children would forget to tell about it; she never wanted to hear of it again.

Three-quarters of an hour later, having hurried in search of ice-cream, and taken what seemed an unending time to get back again, Susan delivered the two children to their mothers and hastened homeward.

As she stepped on the porch, Jim and Robert Bruce rose suddenly from the swinging seat, and bowed low before her, waving their arms and fondly imagining they were giving a creditable imitation of a salaam.

"Hail, happy heroine!" Jimsey said in his deepest tones.

"Welcome, wonderful woman," followed Robert Bruce, not liking this form of salutation, but being unable at the moment to think of anything better.

Susan stared in perplexity. "Stop acting like monkeys and tell me what is the matter with you," she demanded, with a stamp of her foot; and then, as they continued to bow and wave, she took a step

forward. "Get out of my way; you make me dizzy. I'm going into the house."

"Prithee not until we have further speech with thee, my lady." Jimsey, just now absorbed in the reading of historical romance, put himself between her and the door.

"Gramercy, fair maiden. Thy faithful retainers would fain know the thrilling details of the adventure that has recently befallen thee. In other words tell your little chums all about it."

Two red spots began to glow in Susan's cheeks. "Who told you anything about an adventure?" she demanded fiercely.

"Haven't you seen the afternoon papers?" teased Robert Bruce, but Jim, with an instant recognition of his sister's storm signals, intervened.

"Derry Marston saw some child up on a ladder, and he ran, but before he got there he could hear your voice."

"Don't tell me he could hear me shouting like a megaphone," Susan protested wildly. "I—I suppose he thought I was inviting *him* to have an ice-cream cone."

"Fudge! He didn't. He said something made him guess right away why you were talking so loud," put in Brucey with eagerness. "He thought it was very clever of you. He wanted to help, but he was afraid of spoiling things. He

didn't even dare to pass the gateway until the child was safe."

"Oh," murmured Susan despairingly. "He must have heard it all. I—I know he was there when I went for Jiggy like a—like a vertigo; no, that doesn't sound right. I mean a—a termagrant."

"I'll beat you to the dictionary." Robert Bruce hopefully took two steps toward the front door, but stopped because Susan did not follow. "I don't believe either of those words is right."

"I don't care if they're not. Anyway I know what I mean. Don't tell me you still look up words in the dictionary; I remember how furious it made me, because you were so superior about it."

Robert laughed and reddened. "It's still one of my favorite books," he asserted stoutly. "One of my sisters calls me Dicary," he ended with a chuckle.

"Well, anyway, I'm sorry that Marston boy heard me shouting to the skies about ice-cream, and scolding like a—a virago. There, that's right, anyway. Wasn't that what I said in the first place?

"Of course I don't care anything about that boy," Susan went on hastily, looking at the boys with the air of one who would force her convictions upon them. "But he's so stand-offish he makes me

cross. Doesn't he think we're good enough to be spoken to?"

"He speaks to us," ventured Robert Bruce.

"Yes, because you go right up to him and make him. Catch me doing that." Susan's voice was indignant.

"Well, I wouldn't bother about him, Sis. There's no law to oblige him to know us if he doesn't want to," Jimsey remarked in his peace-making way. He took a small volume of one of the Waverley Novels from his pocket and slouched comfortably into a chair. "You'd better go on up and tell Mother what you did. Most girls would have fainted, or raised a racket and scared the kid. I'm glad—yes, I'm really very glad you're my sister."

"Tha-anks! I'm going to find Mother, but I'm not going to mention Jiggy, and you and Brucey needn't either. Fancy that Marston boy standing there and listening! He must have thought I was a ——"

Just what he must have thought her was cut off by the slam of the screen door, and after that came the sound of rapid footsteps on the stairs.

For a moment silence reigned, and then Robert Bruce observed: "Funny, isn't it, that she doesn't seem to think anything of being clever enough to tempt that kid down the ladder?"

"Huh?" murmured Jimsey, pulling himself reluctantly from a gorgeous scene of color and glitter and action. "Huh? Oh, yes! Well, Susan wouldn't, you know. The most she'll worry about is that this Marston boy caught her doing something she thinks must have sounded silly." Jimsey removed his eyes from his book and gazed thoughtfully into the distance.

"To tell the truth," he remarked a moment later, "though I wouldn't mention it to Susan, I think she's so quick about doing the right thing that she doesn't really know everyone else wouldn't have been just as clever. But to be found doing something out of the usual—oh me, oh my. Poor Susan!"

"I don't see why she should want to be just like all the others," meditated Robert Bruce. "Girls certainly are queer."

"That's so. They *are*—queer." Jimsey's eyes were on his book again and he almost forgot to add the last word. He had mounted his horse with a leap, and in glittering armor was careering over the field of battle.

CHAPTER VI

AN OCTOBER DAY

This was a September when chill winds and lack of sunshine made everyone feel that summer was definitely over, and that a cold and early winter would soon be upon them.

Susan decided that it was easier to be spending long hours in school when skies were gray and rain drizzled or poured. At any rate, she found herself starting the school year with unexpected interest, and the scarcely realized purpose of trying to study as whole-heartedly as she played games.

But then came a golden October, flaunting lovely colors, rich in sun-filled days, softening into hazy afternoons when distant hills loomed blue and mysterious. Susan was seized by the urge of out-doors, and everything called to her.

"Daddy, I don't know how I'm going to stand it," she said one morning when they were first at the breakfast-table. "I want to walk miles—all day; I'd like to play tennis half the day and basket-ball the other half, and top off with raking leaves and playing croquet; and then—tramp some more."

Her father covered his ears and looked at her

with a pained expression. "You've got me all mixed up in my whole numbers and fractions," he protested reproachfully. "How can you use up a whole day and then half of it and another half? And besides that have a few odd hours left over for mild diversions like croquet and raking?"

"It might be another day, darling Daddy." There being no one else in the room Susan stopped to give him a hug as she went around to her place at the table. "I shouldn't mind having two or three play-days just now. Lucky for me it's Friday and I shan't have to study this afternoon."

"I know just how you feel about it," her father answered sympathetically. "It's hard, isn't it, to stick to the thing you must do when there's such a strong invitation from Nature to come and be gay? I'm always so grateful to think my children have grit enough to keep on working; it's much easier for me, because I feel just the way they do in such weather as this, and it would be a real trial to have to play the stern father."

"Daddy, do you honestly feel that way? I thought all grown-ups would give anything to be back in school again and have the advantages their children are having. They always say so, anyway, and they can't seem to imagine anything nicer than studying."

Mr. Sheldon laughed. "If we do give that im-

pression—mind you, I don't admit that the grown-ups in this family do—it is because, when we are older, we begin to see how many blind alleys that same studying would have opened to us if we had done our best by it. And we hate to have our children make the mistakes we did." He hurried these last words as he looked at his watch and reached for a muffin at the same moment. "Susan Sheldon, you're making me late arguing questions like this. I prescribe for you a morning of hard work and an afternoon of hard play. Go to it."

Before Susan could reply, the other members of the family began to gather: Motherje, objecting because she had been allowed to take a last nap; Rose, apologetic for not being ready to start for the city with Father, and the boys discussing a problem for which they could not both get the same answer. In the midst of the family conversation, to which she added her share, Susan hugged to herself the knowledge that Daddy understood exactly how she felt. To be sure he seemed to expect her to know what was right and to do it, and, as she and Brucey had agreed, that feeling in parents somehow put one on honor and made life less care-free. Anyway, she was glad she had just this father and no other.

"Good-by, Susan. Don't wander too far in your mind and be late for school." Father, making

a farewell round of the table, tilted her chin and brushed her lips with her napkin as he used to do when she was a child.

"Rose, you're a disappointment to me this morning. I need your strong guidance to get me safely into my office," he went on. "I miss Ellis. He's so practical—not at all affected by enchanting weather like this."

"I'll be with you before you reach the corner," answered Rose. "Excuse me, Motherje; ready in two minutes, Daddy. For my own sake I want to hold on to you while we pass the street that leads to the woods."

Susan's glance met her father's. "We're not the only ones," she said softly.

"I should say not." Jim answered as intelligently as if he had heard their previous conversation. "I bet we all want to do something different from what we have to do. Brucey, you've been mooning off in your mind somewhere this morning; how would you like to spend the day if you could?"

Rose and her father were just going out of the house, and Robert Bruce paused for a moment before answering.

"Oh, I don't know," he said at last undecidedly. "I suppose I'd jump on a horse and ride and ride—and I'd go east so that I could come back facing

the sunset." His eyes were wide, and, as he sat at table in this quiet New England town, he was seeing the broad stretches and rolling prairies of Texas. "Jiminy! We have some sunsets there," he ended, shaking himself out of this unaccustomed mood with an effort. And then, with some curiosity, "Cousin Jean, I suppose you're the only one of us who can do what you please."

"Well, I have an article that must be ready for the publishers as soon as possible, and I don't see any other way than to go at it," confessed Motherje; "but if I could have my way ——" she paused reflectively.

"Go on," begged Jim; "I'm almost sure it would be pretty nearly what I'd do."

"Of course." Susan was laughing at him. "If Mother tells it first it *will* be just what you'd do."

"Make Jim say first," suggested Robert Bruce. "Then you're safe, because Cousin Jean won't make hers over to suit the occasion."

"Wait till I get you outside, young fellow," threatened Jim. "I *will* tell mine first since you're so suspicious. I'd like"—he fixed his eyes on his mother, and kept them there with an intensity which made the others think he was trying to read her mind—"I'd like to go out in the woods with a note-book and pencil and Motherje and ——"

"Oh-oo!" interrupted Susan, "you should have said with Motherje and a note-book and pencil."

"Go on, Jimsey, so far we're in accord," encouraged his mother.

"Please muzzle Susan, then. Well, with all those things I mentioned ——"

"Oh, *things!* Motherje!" exploded his sister, but subsided directly.

"And we'd find a place where the leaves were the deepest and warmest, and we'd sit in the sunshine and talk about—about things—everything ——" Jimsey's voice trailed off vaguely and then resumed its strength. "We'd write down any —any poetical thoughts we might have, and we'd say over all the lovely-sounding words we could think of. So there!" He ended with calm defiance and faced his sister, from whom he knew what to expect.

"Oh, phwee! Lovely-sounding words! Why, that's what you did when you were a little boy." The scorn in Susan's voice!

"That's almost exactly what I was thinking about, Jimsey," said Motherje. "Let's! What time could you get home from school?"

"Two-fifteen. To-day there's a written test I don't have to take. Say, that will be fine! Shall you be through work then?"

"I *will*." Mother's emphasis left nothing to be desired.

"Good for you, Mums. We'll have the time of our young lives. Susan, why don't you and Brucey stroll after us when you get home from school—then we can all walk back together."

"Go all that distance to hear you and Motherje say over lovely-sounding words?" Susan derided. "No, sir! I can think up something better to do than that."

"We'll clean up on poetical thoughts and lovely-sounding words before you come, won't we, Mums?" chuckled Jim. "Oh, come on; be a good sport. Everything's so lovely to-day and I want Brucey to see the place where we're going."

"I'll come," Robert Bruce agreed. "How'll I find you?"

"Susan knows our favorite haunt. There's a small still pool that shimmers like glass, and pointed trees that seem to touch the clouds"—Jim's eyes were partly closed and he was gazing into the distance—"and the sunshine drops through the trees in golden patches, and ——"

"Jim-sey!" Susan's voice was sharp. "You make me think of a parrot—at least, you would if you didn't look more like something else that I can't remember. I suppose you mean that sort of a hollow in the land Mr. Hutchins owns."

"Yes'm." Jim's manner was meek and he smiled at her beguilingly. "I s'pose I do mean just that place. Don't you think it would be nice for you to show Brucey the way over there?"

"Oh, I know the place you mean," Robert Bruce said confidently. "I've been hiking all around by myself, you know, and just the other day I inquired who owned that land. You go west, and then south for quite a distance and then west again."

"Yes, but that's the longest way to go," Susan explained eagerly. She loved to feel that she could teach Brucey something. "I know a much shorter one. If nothing better comes up I don't know that I mind going."

"So like dear Susan always to leave a loophole for escape," murmured her brother. And then with a glance at the clock, "Great Scott, I promised Mr. Colby I'd be at school early this morning. He wants to talk over something with me."

"Goodness! How important we sound," jeered Susan. "Probably he'll want to talk over something with me sometime."

"I dare say. He wants to get in touch with all the pupils." Jim went up-stairs two steps at a time.

For awhile there was a continuous rushing about, up-stairs and down, and then the three of them were off with Motherje waving to them from the porch.

Walking fast with the boys, Susan saw Edith hurrying along a side street to catch up with her, and at her imperious signals dropped behind to wait for her. By the time they met, Jim and Robert Bruce were quite out of hearing.

"Oh, Susan, I meant to get over to your house before you left, but this is really better," panted Edith. "Don't start along toward school; I want to tell you something first.

"You see it's this way," she went on, still breathing quickly, "Mother's going to town, and I teased her to take me and let me get that sweater I've been wanting. And then we're going to lunch at the Tremaine and afterwards see that wonderful movie everyone's talking about. I've forgotten the name of it, but, you know, everyone says it's *so* educational."

"Well," said Susan, somewhat puzzled by this sudden outburst, "I hope you'll have a good time." She took two backward steps toward school, still facing Edith. "And *do* get a becoming sweater."

"Of course I shall, because you're coming, too. Mother said I might ask you, and I'm depending on you, honey-girl, because you have such wonderful taste. Now that little suit you have on this morning—you never told me you were going to have it—I'm craz-ee about it."

Susan thought rapidly. It was Friday and there was nothing that seemed to her particularly important for that day at school. Everyone wanted to do something different this morning—probably Mother wouldn't mind. How fortunate that she had on her new suit and hat.

"I'll run back and see what Mother thinks," she said, and would have started, but Edith seized her arm.

"Look here, my mother's waiting—she gets awfully nervous if I keep her too long. And—and she thinks I started ages ago—in time to see your mother, I mean. Don't tell her I didn't, will you? I don't want to get scolded on such a wonderful day as this. She might even not get me the sweater." Edith's voice and eyes were childishly appealing.

"Oh, Susan, your mother would say yes in a minute; I know she would. Honestly, if we're going at all we've got to hurry right along now. I'm not even sure that we shan't find Mother gone." Edith had turned in the direction of her home and was gently pulling Susan. She did not dare to be too strenuous, for Susan, if urged over-much, was apt suddenly to become unyielding.

"But I can't give up school and go out of town without asking Mother je," began Susan, but Edith rushed on with a torrent of words.

"Listen! As soon as we get into town I can slip away and 'phone your mother. I don't want to stop to do it at my house because that will make Mother more fidgety. I'll explain it to your mother and take all the blame. She'll understand it and she loves to have you have a good time—you know she does."

Susan did know that Motherje wanted her to have good times. It was even possible that she might agree to this one. She was just doubtful enough as to what she meant to do to allow herself to be led along in the direction of Edith's house.

After all, Motherje and Jimsey had chosen what they most cared for without considering the rest of the family. She encouraged herself with this thought, and with the memory that, fortunately, she had agreed to join them only if nothing more interesting happened.

Motherje wouldn't have any chance to worry if Edith telephoned her as soon as they got in town. It leaped into her mind with reassuring clearness that Daddy had said he wanted them all to see the moving-picture which Edith had mentioned.

"Wake up, Susan, you're as glum as an owl." Edith, who had been chattering volubly about nothing, gave her friend a playful shake. "Oh! Just as I thought! There's Mother already in the car! For goodness' sake don't let her think you

don't want to go, and *do-on't* give it away that your mother doesn't know."

This last was spoken rapidly in a low tone as they approached the car, and the next moment Edith was saying in a loud, cheerful voice, "I threw a big coat into the auto for you, Susan-honey; it was no use to make you bring one way from your house, and these warmish days do turn chilly sometimes."

Susan stepped into the car, shook hands with Mrs. Lane, and hoped she was looking happier than she felt. "It was very sweet of you to let me come," she murmured in a way quite un-Susan-like. Somehow she felt bound with chains of secrecy, and, because she was so in the habit of being frank, this feeling worried her.

Just as they started she noticed that Mrs. Lane's eyes were fixed on her curiously.

"Do you mean to study on the way, Susan?" she asked with a laugh which her guest found strangely disconcerting. "You seem to have quite a library with you."

Then, for the first time, Susan realized that she was still clutching under her arm three school-books; in her troubled state of mind she had felt neither their weight nor the pressure of them against her side.

"Oh—oh, yes, that is I don't mean to study, but

—why, they are there, aren't they?" The warm color rushed into Susan's cheeks, and she stared at the books as if she fondly hoped they might disappear after this lucid explanation.

"You must have forgotten to put them down when you heard my plan," Edith put in glibly. "You were starting for school. Stupid of me not to see them. Here, let Thomas have them; there's plenty of room on the seat with him. Thomas, take these books, please."

As the chauffeur turned to take them Susan said a pleasant good-morning to him and, for some reason, felt better; at least, to say that was being perfectly honest. She had always felt an interest in Thomas since the day last spring when he had cut his arm, and she had stopped the bleeding and bandaged it so he could go to the doctor. It was comforting to remember that she had been the only one who had known what to do.

After the automobile started it was a relief to Susan to find that no conversation was expected of her. Edith and her mother were discussing their plans for the day, and Susan listened to their chatter and thought they seemed very much alike. She did not know Mrs. Lane very well. There was something about her sharp manner and critical gaze that made Susan uncomfortable. As she listened, she wondered if Edith and her mother ever

had any pleasant, intimate times together like the talks she had with Motherje.

"Motherje!" Thinking of her, Susan realized clearly that now, this very morning, she was doing something her mother and father would dislike. It wasn't the thing itself—there was nothing wrong about going to the city with Mrs. Lane and Edith—but it was missing school and going somewhere without permission—and it certainly was sneaky to let Mrs. Lane believe that Motherje had been asked. Susan wasn't afraid of being scolded, but she hated to think that Motherje and Daddy might lose confidence in her.

A clock in a church they were passing struck the hour. "Nine o'clock! School just beginning," remarked Susan's mind.

"Susan, you look as if something dreadful was going to happen to you," said Mrs. Lane unexpectedly. "Anyone might think we were running away with you instead of giving you a good time."

This so aptly fitted her feelings that Susan looked startled. "I—I suppose I ought to be in school," she began but a warning pinch from Edith stopped her. "It's a—a lovely day," she went on half-heartedly. "We shall have great fun." She did her best to look happy over it.

"Your mother probably thinks as I do that girls ought not to be tied to work too closely," Mrs. Lane

said. "I didn't really expect her to let you go, but I'm glad we agree so well."

Susan kept back a perfect torrent of contradiction. Motherje would believe that girls ought to stick to work as much as anyone else—she was sure she would. For the moment she could not fancy Motherje agreeing with Mrs. Lane about anything.

Anyway, now that she had let herself get into this, she must carry it through in the best way she could. She would make herself be cheerful and talk—and then, just as these good resolutions were growing in her mind, a wayside sign-post suddenly flashed upon her vision, and was gone.

"Creston. Eight miles to Melford." That was all it said, but it made Susan remember that, on the next street parallel to this, there was a trolley-line by which she could go to Melford. And of all places in the world Melford seemed the most desirable just now.

"Oh!" she cried, and began to wriggle out from beside Edith. "Would you mind if I stopped here and went back on the car? I—I can't quite explain—I ——"

"Of course we should mind." Edith pulled her down on the seat again. "Why, Honey, we're going to have the time of our lives."

"You absurd child," laughed Mrs. Lane, "you

don't think I would let you go back alone when your mother has trusted you to me? I can't understand what makes you want to go back."

Susan, recognizing the fairness of this point of view, looked uncomfortable. If she explained she would get Edie into trouble—perhaps keep her from getting the new sweater to-day. Nevertheless she held to her point and stubbornly pulled herself out of the seat again.

"I've just got to go back," she said, and hated the sound of her agitated voice. "Please just stop for a second—the trolley-line is only a step away. I——"

"Susan, you're foolish," Mrs. Lane insisted with all the playfulness gone from her manner. "I shall certainly never let Edith invite you to go anywhere again if you're going to act this way."

Susan looked forlornly at the chauffeur's back—why couldn't they let him stop? It wouldn't take her a second to—all at once she realized with a catch in her breath that the car was going slowly—coming to a halt. Then the chauffeur got out and went to the front of it.

"A little engine-trouble, ma'am," he said in answer to Mrs. Lane's annoyed inquiry. "I've been hearing something for quite a ways back. I can fix it in a jiffy."

For a young person of Susan's quick decisiveness

it was a simple thing to open the door and step out. The next instant she was talking from the vantage of the road.

"I'm awfully sorry to behave so, Mrs. Lane. I know it's impolite—perhaps sometime I can make you see my side of it a little ——"

"Susan, you're as mean as you can be—I just can't bear you." There were angry tears in Edith's eyes.

"Don't say anything more, Edie. If she doesn't like our company we don't want her." Mrs. Lane's cold voice held keen displeasure. "Susan, be kind enough to tell your mother I couldn't force you to stay with us."

"Yes'm, I will," answered Susan, meek enough now that she had gained her point. "She'll be glad—I mean she'll be sorry that I had to act this way."

At sight of Mrs. Lane's expression it flashed into Susan's mind that for this Connie would lose the chance to make the Lane garden beautiful, but, in spite of this dire thought, her determination to go back to Melford was unshaken.

"Good-by. I'm really sorry," she said once more, and started toward the sidewalk. There was no use in standing there and apologizing when they had both turned their faces away from her.

She had almost reached the next street where the

trolley-line was when she heard someone hurrying after her, and turned with the disagreeable feeling that it might be Edith. Instead the chauffeur's pleasant face confronted her.

" I've brought your books, Miss Susan," he murmured, and handed them to her. A moment he hesitated, then, " The car will be along in a few minutes; it's ten cents from here and ten when you change to the Melford car."

At his words, Susan's hand flew to her coat pocket where she always carried a change purse, and panic seized her. In putting on the new coat this morning she had forgotten to change her purse!

" I thought perhaps you might be after forgetting your change, Miss," said Thomas, beginning to back in the direction of the automobile. " I slipped a quarter into the book—the big one. It's me that hasn't forgotten how kindly you took care of my arm that day."

Before she could thank him he was gone. Susan watched him for a moment, looked beyond him to the automobile, half hoping that Edith would wave to her, then walked on a little farther and stood waiting for the car.

She found the quarter and held it tightly. Never had twenty-five cents looked more beautiful to her.

" If I ever get to be a doctor I shall call this my

first fee," she said to herself with a queer feeling that the future was showing a bit of itself to her. "Anyway, the name of Thomas will always sound good to me." And just then as if to verify the prediction of the good Thomas, the car she was to take came hurrying around a curve not far away.

CHAPTER VII

SUSAN TAKES A WALK

By the time Susan reached Melford it was ten o'clock; she was an hour late for school, but she had planned her course of action. At the Intermediate School pupils had been expected to report to the principal when they were late without an excuse, therefore she went straight to the office.

On the way there she found herself wishing that she were to meet the former principal who had been in Melford so many years and had known her sisters and brothers. Fortunately for her failing courage, the office door was open, and Mr. Colby, sitting at his desk, could see her as she came along the hall, so there was no chance for her to change her mind.

"Good-morning," he said pleasantly, as she went into the room.

"I'm late—I'm an hour late," responded Susan bluntly, so absorbed in this main fact that she forgot the courtesies of the occasion.

"Well, that *is* serious, isn't it?" Mr. Colby's manner was so sympathetic that Susan liked him at once. "I'm sorry, but though I know your face

I can't seem to add the name to it," he went on in the same friendly way.

"Why, of course not. How could you with so many new pupils? I'm Susan Sheldon, and my brother Jim is in the Junior class." Her anxiety lessened; at least it was not going to be so hard as she had expected to talk to this new teacher.

"Thank you, Miss Sheldon; I shan't forget your name again. And now about the tardiness; did you bring a written excuse from home?"

"I—I couldn't. There wasn't any excuse." Susan waited a moment, hoping that Mr. Colby would say something. Then, as he only looked at her expectantly, she went on.

"It was this way: someone wanted to take me to the city, and I started, without asking my mother, and after we had gone a few miles, I came back on the trolley."

The weight of anxiety seemed to have shifted from Susan to Mr. Colby; he looked perplexed—almost troubled.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Sheldon, since you have told me about this so frankly, and I have confidence that it won't happen again, I should like to let the matter drop here. I fancy many of us felt like wandering this morning." He was smiling as he said this, and Susan knew at once that he perfectly understood the magic of the day.

"We all did at our house," she murmured, deciding that, after all, Mr. Colby was really a wonderful man. She quite agreed with him that it would be a good thing to drop the matter now. She was sure that she should never ——

"But—this is a large school, and I can't do for one what I may not be willing to do for others. You see that, don't you?" His manner was decided now, and he fixed a clear gaze on Susan, who nodded unwillingly.

"You know the rule is that one must bring a written excuse for tardiness. Now what do you suggest that we should do in your case?"

"Are you—are you asking me to tell how I ought to be punished?" In her inmost heart Susan thought this a most unheard-of thing to do, but she politely refrained from saying so. "I—I suppose I ought to stay after school," she added unwillingly.

"Let's see—you are an hour late—suppose we cut that and decide that you shall stay a half-hour after school." There was something in Mr. Colby's expression that made Susan feel he was sorry to make it as much as that. "And during that time you might keep busy by ——"

"Oh, don't—please don't tell me to copy a poem," Susan interrupted impulsively.

Mr. Colby laughed. "That wasn't what I was

going to say, but I'll make a note of it. Is that the worst punishment you can think of?"

"The very worst." Susan's manner was tinged with gloom. "In two of the Intermediate grades I was always being punished by having to copy poems after school, and it has just about spoiled all poetry for me. And Mother and Jim love it so; and they're always trying to make me like something—but I just can't."

Jim, who was used to being made fun of by his younger sister for his love of verse, would have marvelled to hear the depth of feeling in her voice at this moment.

"You see," Susan went on, like one freeing her mind after long repression, "I don't tell them so, but I'm not too stupid to know that some poetry *must* be beautiful. But for me rhyming words are so tied up with little hateful memories—like wanting to get out to play, or having to copy a poem two or three times over, till it seemed like a bunch of words, without any sense, that I can't find the beauty in any of it." She pulled herself up with a jerk and wondered why she had made this long explanation to someone she scarcely knew. And yet, for some reason, she felt sure of his understanding sympathy.

"That's a shame—I can't bear to have poetry used in that way—it's a ——" Mr. Colby left his

sentence unfinished and started over again. "Teachers have different methods of discipline," he said slowly, almost as if he were apologizing for some of them. "But copying poetry—for a punishment! Well, that will never be one of my suggestions, Miss Sheldon. I was going to say that you might use the half-hour as you would have used the first hour had you been here."

"We had special work in our note-books," murmured Susan, much relieved. "Perhaps Miss Ashton will let me make up that."

"Please tell her that, except for something entirely beyond your control, this is your last tardiness for the year. You know, Miss Sheldon, aside from the studies there's a great deal of machinery about a school that depends more than anything else on the willing help of the pupils. And I should like to make our record for attendance and punctuality as perfect as possible."

It came into Susan's mind like a flash that someone had said that this was his first time of being principal of a school. Of course, he must want it to succeed; she could perfectly understand that.

"I'll try to—to help—I won't be late again," she said hastily, and felt a sudden glow of interest, a real desire to put her shoulder to the wheel.

As she left the office it occurred to her that she must be growing up. She was not used to feeling

so serious and responsible as she did at this moment. And, except briefly, when she had listened to Mr. Colby's talk on the opening day, she had never thought of school as anything but a place where she was shut up every day half against her will. Now, in her mind, was a glimmer of something different —that she was a working part of it—could either help it or hold it back.

She was so convincingly regretful when she explained the matter that she made Miss Ashton feel she was really going to enjoy this youngest Sheldon after all. Before this she had been a little doubtful as to whether Susan would carry on the traditions of the family.

"To-day you look like Rose, and there's something—yes, there *is* something about you suggestive of Connie," Miss Ashton said unexpectedly.

Susan looked startled. Of course everyone said she resembled Rose, though she herself never could tell why, when their noses were different and their eyes not the same color. But to suggest Connie in any way! It must be because she had been having such unusually good thoughts for the past few minutes.

With such an impetus she got through the morning unexpectedly well, and put through the half-hour after school with a calmness that made it seem comparatively short. Then she went home to find

Robert Bruce on the front porch waiting impatiently for her.

"Had to stay after school, didn't you?" was his surprising greeting. "Why didn't you tell a fellow how long you'd be?"

"I couldn't go chasing around after you. I knew you'd wait." There was a delightful confidence about this which should have pleased him, but he only said, "Bad child or what?"

Susan stared at him. "Oh—you mean why was I kept? Well, if you must know I was late." She had not meant to tell even so much as this to anyone except Mother, but she could hardly refuse to answer a direct question.

"H'm. I told Jim that girl would make you late—that Edith-girl, I mean. How'd she manage it?"

"I haven't said any girl made me late. And I don't see that I have to tell you about it, anyway. I'm going into the house; in a few minutes I shall be ready to start. Are you ready?"

Susan went by him and hurried up-stairs. She quite admired herself for the calm way in which she had changed the subject. It was rather prying of Brucey to ask such questions, she was thinking, as she put on something suitable for the woods. She certainly didn't intend to let out anything about Edith. She wished she could be sure that she

hadn't spoiled Connie's chances for planning the Lanes' garden. Anyway, it was very unfair to make that depend on anything so unstable as her own friendship with Edith, who, for all she could tell, might be out and in with her a dozen times before spring.

"Now, are we going my way to that marvellous place Jim described?" demanded Robert Bruce when she appeared on the porch again. "I don't believe it's any longer than your way. At any rate, if we both started at the same time I'd get there as soon as you would."

"Very likely. You'd probably gallop all the way. But I *know* my way is shorter." Susan's manner was too positive to go unchallenged.

"I'll bet you this peach." Robert drew from a hitherto concealed paper bag the biggest, rosiest, most luscious-looking peach Susan had ever seen. "I could only get four like this; the fruit-man was cleaned out," he explained. "And the little ones didn't look anything compared to these. Now, if you say so, we'll leave two here, and when we get home the winner shall have his own and the other one."

"Shall have *her* own, you mean. Only you've got to promise that you won't walk any faster than you would with me. And you might as well give me the two peaches to eat on the way, for you'll find

me waiting for you." Susan smiled at him confidently.

"Not if I know it. And don't you be too sure." Robert Bruce rose, stretched himself to his full height and prepared for action; a contest always found him eager.

"We'll leave two of them at home," he said again, and then a sudden idea made him pause. "Oh, probably we'd better take the same way, after all; I'll go your road."

"You're weakening; you're afraid I'll get the peaches," laughed Susan.

"Not a bit of it." Robert was startled into entire openness by the taunt. "It's because I don't believe Cousin Jean would like to have you go alone."

"Nonsense! What do you suppose I do when you're not here? It's only a short distance my way. I'll take Rex if you feel particular about it. He looks fierce if he isn't. I often go walking with Rex so you needn't worry." She raised her voice in a clear, "Oo-whoo! Rexy! Come on!"

The thumping of a tail was heard, then a big, tawny head appeared around the corner of the porch, and finally the whole of Rex lounged into view. As he came toward Susan he opened his mouth in a prodigious yawn.

"Well, of all things! I must have broken up

your best nap," Susan said consolingly. "Brace up, old thing. You've got to escort me through the wildest of the forest, as Jimsey would say."

"He certainly looks the part," admitted Robert Bruce. "I suppose it will be all right. Now what shall I do with the peaches?"

"I'll put them on a dish in a closet in the living-room where no one goes very often. It might be dangerous if Rose or Daddy got home before we did, and found such beauties as these in plain sight."

"I'll carry them for you," said Robert Bruce as Susan cupped her hands and held them out. "You might be—might be ——"

"Don't say any more. If I weren't so sweet-tempered I should refuse to have anything more to do with you," responded Susan amiably. "Come on; we'll go together. That ought to suit you."

As they went into the house Susan stopped suddenly. "Let's not have these for prizes. How do you suppose I'm going to stand it to see Mother and Jimsey eating their peaches when I can't have any?"

"How 'bout me? Shan't I have to wait, too?"

"No. Your chance is gone the minute you put them up for a prize. I tell you honestly that I know the walks all about here and you haven't a pos-si-bili-ty of getting there first." Susan em-

phasized the long word convincingly, but Robert Bruce shook his head.

"No, sir! I will not give up. And as for watching the others eat 'em, why, that's what my Dad would call discipline."

"What do you mean? Why does he call it that?" Susan was in the china closet now looking for a suitable dish in which to enshrine such beauty.

"Well, sometimes, for a fact, I don't know just what he does mean," responded Robert Bruce with great candor. He was standing near the closet with his hands outspread and his face lighted by the smile which always came when he talked of his father. "You see Dad and I are such good pals that I almost always take it for granted that what he says goes. But this particular remark of his comes when I want something in an awful rush—think I can't live without it." He chuckled throatily as if he found the memory of these times vastly entertaining. "When I get to that pitch he is more than likely to say, 'Think it over for a week, old man, and if you want it just as much then we'll talk about it. Discipline! We must have discipline.'"

"And do you usually want it just as fiercely at the end of the week?" Susan was not particularly interested in anything relating to discipline, but

Brucey's absorption had given her a chance to abstract the peaches from his outstretched hands without his knowledge, and she liked playing a joke on him. She was now putting them on a cool-looking dish whose color melted into theirs.

"That's the funny thing about it; I often don't. I've missed having a lot of things that way. But I will say this for Dad's method: when I do want it as much at the end of the week he generally lets me have it, and I usually keep on liking it and wanting it for a long time."

"Well, if that is discipline, excuse me; I want what I want right away quick." Susan took the dish and started toward the living-room, and Robert Bruce came out of his maze of memories in a hurry.

"Here! Who said you could do all that!" he exclaimed, looking at his empty hands in absurd surprise.

"Well, I couldn't wait a week for you as your father does. Now, look and see where I put 'em so you'll know where to find them when you—don't win."

Robert laughed. "I shan't mind seeing you eat 'em," he responded magnanimously. "And, say, don't you go thinking my Dad is awfully stiff and severe. He isn't. I've figured it out since I've been trying to tell you—he's only giving me a

chance to find out the real value of a thing before I plunge ahead and buy it. See?"

"Uh-huh. I guess so," murmured Susan absent-mindedly. "It won't make any difference if I don't, will it? There, now, those precious peaches are safe, and we can go along."

"It's almost on the dot of three-thirty." Robert was holding his watch in his hand, and they were both on the porch again, poised for flight. "Now—when I say go ——"

"Don't say it! Don't! My escort's gone to sleep again!" Susan ran around the porch and dislodged Rex from the sunniest spot on the side piazza.

"Come on, old fellow. You'll feel better when you get started." Susan prodded him lightly with the toe of her shoe. "It's a shame you have to get up," she said with unwonted consideration. For some reason there was an air of unusual gentleness about Susan to-day.

"Now, look at your watch. Hurry, please, or Rexy will go to sleep again. And when you start remember that you're to walk the way you would with me."

"Like this?" Robert Bruce took a few mincing steps. "Christopher! Even Rex eyes me scornfully when I try to be funny. I know what you mean and I promise not to exceed the speed

limit. Well, I'm off due west; which way do you go?"

Susan pointed with a generous indefiniteness. "That way. I go to the end of the street, and then there's a path that curves around—oh, I'll have to show you some day. Now, brace up, Rex. We're almost starting."

"Thre-e-e—thirty-five!" said the watch-holder explosively, and they all went down the steps together, Rex hanging back somewhat in spite of Susan's compelling grip on his collar.

"My word! If I have to drag this thing all the way perhaps you will win," Susan said ruefully. Then, as they went in different directions, she flung back a gay challenge. "It really makes me feel better to have a handicap. I don't like to win when it's too easy."

"Don't you worry," he called, without lessening the steady pace he had set for himself.

Turning for a last look at him, Susan laughed softly. "Rexy, he's got about as much chance to win as—as ——" the chance seemed to her so small that she could find no word to describe it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MARSTON BOY

SUSAN walked along at a moderate pace, and for a few moments had something of a struggle to keep her escort's nose pointed in the right direction. He was so wistfully certain a nap on his own sunny porch was the only thing that appealed to him that, at frequent intervals, he found himself obliged to sit still and think about it.

When this happened Susan surveyed him with deep disgust. "If you were with Connie I suppose she would let you sneak back there. She's spoiled you; that's what she's done. But I'm not made that way." Susan's voice was half-reproachful, half-irritated, and Rex looked up at her in mild protest.

"Come on, Rexy! Find Connie! Cats-s-s-s! Sic 'em!" This time her manner was wholly stimulating, and the succession of familiar slogans lighted a gleam in the dog's eyes. He barked in answer; tried an unexpected gambol which seemed to surprise him; then settled down to a sober acceptance of a situation which he could not change.

"There! That's better," commended Susan, patting his head. "You see I promised I'd take

you and I've got to. And it isn't easy to drag along as much dog as you are—besides it isn't dignified."

As if making a pact to behave honorably, Rex suddenly slid a cold nose into her hand, then trotted along by her side in decorous fashion. It was not until they left the street and struck into the path which led through a wooded field that he forgot his duty as guardian and dashed ahead to scare a chipmunk which had the audacity to cross the path.

"Rex! You silly! Let that chippie alone. He's up on that tree-trunk laughing at you already. Anyway, this wood belongs to him more than to you."

Rex, affecting perfect indifference to small, darting creatures, came slowly back and met her with a faithful, adoring gaze. She belonged to his family and he would never desert her. What were chipmunks to him?

Susan walked on joyously. She loved this sunshiny afternoon, warm as summer, but tempered by an exhilarating air. She was glad that she was soon to see Mother and Jimsey, and not sorry that Mr. Brucey would have to find out there were some things he did not know about distances.

Suddenly a great wave of thankfulness swept over her because she had not gone farther with

Edith. It was weak-minded even to have started, she decided. Queer, when everyone thought her so obstinate, that she should so often give up to Edith.

"Lucky for me that Thomas wanted to look at his engine," she remarked soberly to Rex, who, at the sound of her voice, gave her an understanding glance. And then, "I believe he stopped his car on purpose—he wanted me to get back to school!" For the first time this was plain to her. She must get Daddy to thank him and return the loan of the money.

A friendly "woof" from Rex brought her back to the present, and she saw that they were approaching a house and realized at once that this was where the Marston boy lived. She had forgotten that she would have to go directly by it, and she wished she had taken the other way with Robert Bruce.

For an instant she stood still with her hand on the dog's collar; then she saw it was too late to do anything but go on, for the Marston boy was coming around from the back of the house, carrying a rake and pulling after him a large wooden box on rollers. If his face had been less sober and his rake not so large, Susan could have fancied that he had gone back to the toys of his childhood, but there was no mistaking the seriousness of his purpose

when he began to work. Apparently he was unaware that any human being was in sight, and the fallen leaves were soon heaped high in the box.

Susan walked on quietly and tried not to look at him, but could not help giving a sly glance now and then. Once, quite unexpectedly, she found him looking her way, but before she had turned her head he had dropped his rake and was running toward the house.

"He saw us that time—we've scared him, Rexy," Susan said with a chuckle and quickened her pace. "We'll get out of his landscape as soon as we can." A smile curved her lips as she went on; she was thinking how funny that was, and that it would be something interesting to tell the girls.

All at once she was aware that someone was running behind her, calling her name, and she turned to face the Marston boy and saw, as he approached, that his eyes were wide with fear.

"Would you—would you come back and stay with my mother while I get a doctor?" he panted, breathless from fright. "She's had a fall ——"

Without a word Susan raced after him, up the front walk and into the house.

"She's in the living-room. I—I must see if she's opened her eyes," the boy said hoarsely. "I never saw her look like this before."

Susan rather prided herself on not being afraid

when people were ill or had accidents, but, in spite of that, she found herself shaking when she saw Mrs. Marston lying on the floor. She was a slender, brown-haired woman, looking almost like a little girl as she lay there so still.

Susan dropped down beside her and found a flickering pulse in the limp wrist. "She's just fainted," she said with certainty. "You lift her head and I'll pull this cushion out."

"I thought I was doing a great act when I put it under," mumbled the boy, but he obeyed instantly.

"Get some water." It was not without reason that her playmates had always come to Susan when their hurts needed attention. She was rubbing Mrs. Marston's hands now, and to all appearances was as calm as if she had daily practise in reviving persons who had fainted. The boy's sigh of relief as he went after the water was an unconscious tribute to the helper he had found.

"Don't you think I'd better run for a doctor?" he asked anxiously when he came back, but Susan shook her head. She had seen a quiver of the eyelids—she was sure that the pulse was stronger.

The next moment Mrs. Marston's lips twisted as if she were going to cry, her eyelids fluttered, and she said in a piteous voice—a voice her son had never heard before—"Derrick! I want you!"

"Mother, it's Derry." The boy was instantly on his knees beside her with her hand in his. His face was almost as white as hers, but his voice was steady and he had a protecting air which made Susan begin to like him.

"Yes, I know now," sighed the small voice again, and there was a stress on the last word that seemed to breathe into Susan's mind the knowledge of some sorrowful secret. Then Derry's mother opened her eyes, tried to smile, and, seeing Susan, looked startled.

"She might have the pillow now," said Susan in the most matter-of-fact way, and slid it under her head when the boy lifted her. "In a few moments I think you'll feel like letting us help you to the couch."

"I know I shall." Mrs. Marston was really smiling now, and Susan smiled back at her in friendliest fashion. It was almost as if they agreed in this joyous way that the unpleasantness of fainting should be made light of for the sake of the boy, whose eyes were dark with anxiety.

"I feel better already," Mrs. Marston persisted. "Help me get up, please, Derry."

"Let's both help," began Susan, but the boy, anxious to be of service, already had his mother on her feet and then in his strong young arms.

"What's the use of having a small mother if you

can't put her where you want her?" he demanded, as he laid her on the couch. Then with sudden suspicion in his tone, "Mother, did you have any lunch, or did you just keep on working and working till ——"

"I wasn't hungry; and I had only a little to finish," his mother answered faintly. "And then the room began to go 'round, and my work slipped —oh, Derry, please see what happened to my work."

"It looks all right to me," responded the boy, picking up a table-cloth and regarding it with such open disapproval that Susan wondered. "I suppose you want me to fold it, but you know I'm no good at it. I never could manage to get the creases in the same places," he ended gloomily.

"Let me," offered Susan, who was secretly curious as to the kind of work that could absorb a person to the point of forgetting to eat. As she took it she saw at once that it was the most beautiful table-cloth she had ever touched, and that the almost finished monogram was as perfect as the quality of the linen.

"That's the loveliest embroidery I ever saw," she exclaimed. "How can you do it so evenly?"

"I'm glad you like it; it's my own design," Mrs. Marston said wistfully, looking more girlish than ever, and much too young to be the mother of her

son. "The napkins are done, and I so wanted to finish that to-day."

"Well, that's not half so important as having your lunch when the time comes," said her son soberly. "I'm going to get you something to eat."

He turned appealingly to Susan. "You'll stay a few minutes, won't you, Miss Sheldon? Oh, excuse me—this is Miss Sheldon, Mother. I've told you about her; she's in my class at school. I hate to leave her alone ——" by this time he was talking to Susan again which explained his confusion of pronouns.

"I'm almost all right now"—Mrs. Marston smiled at Susan—"are we keeping you—were you going anywhere?"

"Just to meet some of my family in Mr. Hutchins' meadow. But they can wait." In the interest of this adventure Susan renounced her family without a qualm.

"Good for you! I'll dash into the kitchen and get something for Mother." The boy was off the next moment and almost immediately there came to Susan's ears the sound of running water and the click of the teakettle against the faucet.

"He seems to know just what to do," remarked Susan, breaking a silence which had lasted for several minutes.

"Who? Oh, Derry," answered his mother as if

her thoughts had been far away. "He's a treasure." And then, to Susan's distress, the soft brown eyes filled with tears, and though the little lady on the couch tried to wink them away, two big ones ran down her cheeks.

"Oh," she breathed, stretching out her hands to Susan, "I never let Derry see me cry—do help me to stop this. I need someone to—to hold on to."

The next instant Susan was kneeling by the side of the couch and holding the shaking hands in her firm grasp. "He won't be back for several minutes and I'll lend you my shoulder. Just cry if you feel like it. If you get it out of your system, perhaps it won't bother you any more."

She was so funnily matter-of-fact that Mrs. Marston laughed instead of crying. At least, it was meant for a laugh as both she and Susan knew, and she pulled one hand from Susan's grasp and pluckily dashed away the tears.

"Not going to cry," she announced brokenly—"don't believe in it, do you? Would you mind getting my handkerchief from the table, Miss Sheldon?"

As Susan brought the handkerchief she was conscious that it was of delicate linen, and that a faint breath of perfume lingered in it. Her observant eye had also taken in the fact that a pile of napkins lay near it on the table with the beautiful

monogram uppermost. Even in a fleeting glance she fancied that she could decipher the letter M, which, of course, stood for Marston.

"I don't see how you can do such exquisite work," she said admiringly. "I never could sit still long enough."

"You could if you had to. At your age I ——" she stopped abruptly, and the grim shadow which had fallen upon her lifted. "Here's Derry! You *were* quick about it. I'm so glad."

"You begin on this, Mother, and then you have a bit of toast, and after that you may give your order to the chef," Derry said, as he brought a cupful of steaming bouillon over to the couch. "Starving persons are never allowed to eat as much as they want the first thing."

Then, alarmed by her paleness, he went on reproachfully. "Oh, Mother, how could you forget your lunch? You know you haven't been eating much lately."

"Some day, Miss Sheldon, my son is going to write a book on 'How to Manage Mothers,'" Mrs. Marston murmured. "Please, Derry, give me food before you scold me. I don't know how I'm going to take it, though; my head spins when I try to sit up." She had been making an effort to prop herself on one elbow, but now she gave it up with a sigh and fell back against the cushions. "Oh-oo!

I believe I don't want anything to eat," she said faintly.

Once more Susan dropped on her knees beside the couch. "Give me the cup," she said with authority. Her outstretched hand had almost taken it before he responded. "Is this just the way she likes it?" The next moment she was gently shaking a teaspoonful to be sure that it was not too hot.

"This is going to make your head stop spinning," she said confidently. "Now, another. Just try a third one—odd numbers are lucky, you know. When you've taken a little more you'll feel ever so much better."

"I'll get the toast," murmured Derry and disappeared. Susan hoped he was impressed by her ability as a nurse, and wondered what Jimsey would say if he should suddenly see her on her knees coaxing, commanding, handling the teaspoon without spilling a drop. She was surprised herself at the calm confidence she felt in what she was saying and doing.

"I begin to feel better," Mrs. Marston announced. "I think I can sit up enough to drink it." Which she pluckily did, much to Susan's surprise. But she nestled into the cushions again with a sigh of relief when the last drop was finished, and closed her eyes.

Susan slipped into a chair and looked about her for the moments that intervened before Derry came back again. It was a pleasant room with furniture of dark wood, some interesting pictures, and really handsome rugs. Doors opened from it into two bedrooms and a small kitchen. There was the gleam of silver and cut glass on a sideboard of ancient appearance.

Susan knew this little house of old, because friends of her family had lived here, but she had never seen it look so—so—she searched for the right word—so distinguished as it did now. Distinguished was a word that Rose often used, and Susan was fond of treading in Rose's footsteps.

"It's taken me pretty long," said Derry coming in with the toast and a cup of hot milk. "I—I dropped the first slice."

Susan, getting up to be chief nurse again, told herself that when the Marston boy gave his mother a smile like this—it was a boyish, amused, half-apologetic grin—he made it seem as if they were really chums. His next words effectually checked her in her progress toward the couch.

"Mums, I'll feed you this time," he went on, and Susan at once had the feeling that now was the moment for her to take her departure. She really regretted that this interesting adventure must come to an end. Perhaps, if she proposed going, they

would urge her to stay; they might even tell her something about themselves—why they had come here to live and why they seemed not to want to know anyone. The next instant she was scorning herself for her own foolish imaginings—it wasn't likely they'd tell her the story of their lives.

"Unless I can do something for you I'm afraid I must go," she said, and fancied that the boy looked relieved. "I'm really running a race—that is you'd hardly call it that—but I'm trying to get to a certain place before someone else does. So I think I'd better hurry. You don't really need me, do you?"

Susan smiled at the little lady on the couch and was surprised to find that the latter was regarding her with almost a childlike longing, as if she hated to have her go.

"You've been so sweet to us," Mrs. Marston said with a catch in her voice. "I—I just love getting acquainted with you even if I did do it in this foolish manner, and I hope ——" her eyes had wandered to her son's face and she came to an embarrassed pause. Then—"Derry and I both thank you very much," she went on quickly. "I don't know what we should have done without you. I—I hate to have you go."

She was so wistfully friendly that Susan felt inclined to yield to the appeal of her voice and man-

ner. But a glance at Derry made her cling to her purpose. He, also, looked appealingly anxious, but Susan had an unshakable conviction that he was worried for fear she'd change her mind and stay.

"I'm very glad I happened to be passing," she said quickly. "Please don't work so hard and forget your lunch." It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if she might come again, but something kept her from it.

Derry held the door open for her as she went out. "It was mighty good of you—I was scared stiff." His manner was abrupt, his voice a little hoarse, but there was something in his expression which made Susan certain that he wanted to say more.

"That's all right; glad I happened to be passing," she answered, and realized at once that she had said this same thing before. Involuntarily she lingered an instant half-expecting that he would say something else. Then with a quick "Good-by" she ran down the steps and heard him shut the door behind her.

Rex, who had been sleeping in the sunshine while he waited, opened one eye at the sound of the closing door and got up heavily. It somehow comforted Susan to have him rub his big head against her, and she felt a sense of companionship as they left the road and struck into the path which would lead them to Motherje and Jim.

"If you were a human you would have been polite enough to ask me to come again, Rexy, dear," she said resentfully.

Rex, hearing his name, crowded a friendly nose into the hand nearest him and almost pushed her out of the path in his affectionate loyalty.

By this time the sun had dropped low and the late afternoon shadows were softly falling. The trees, no longer in the first glory of their autumn coloring, were still beautiful in their dulling reds and browns. Susan rustled through the fallen leaves as she used to do when she was a child, and enjoyed it. She walked fast, because by this time Motherje would be thinking of getting home and perhaps would be worrying about her.

Persistently her mind went back to Derry and his mother. Evidently she had not made a hit with them since they did not seem to want to know her better.

"Queer, isn't it, Rexy?" she said as seriously as if she had been addressing a person. "But I think it's still more peculiar that a mother should spend her time embroidering beautiful table-cloths and napkins, and forget to eat and—and make her boy do the housework. Motherje wouldn't. We don't care, though, do we, Rex? Come on, I'll race you."

Three minutes later Susan dropped down on a

steamer-rug beside Motherje and discovered to her great surprise that Brucey had not yet arrived.

"Do you mean it really?" She peered around tree-trunks and looked up into the branches. "Or is he just hiding?"

"We haven't seen 'hide nor hair' of him," quoted Jim, rejoicing in his pun which was a surprise to him. "Say, do you get that, Susan? You asked if he was hiding, and I said we hadn't seen hide nor ——"

"What do you take me for—a baby?" interrupted his sister, much incensed at having anything so obvious explained to her. "I hate puns, anyway—silly things. I believe Brucey's lost his way. He should have been here before this because I ——"

"Hark!" Motherje said softly, and then to them all came the sound of Brucey's voice lifted in song. A moment later they could distinguish the words.

> "Her plates are flaked by the sun, dear lass,
> And her ropes are taut with the dew,
> For we're booming down on the old trail,
> our own trail, the out trail,
> We're sagging south on the Long Trail—
> the trail that is always new."

He was roaring it out lustily with his head thrown back and he didn't see them until he was very near. Then he stopped singing and said with exaggerated

politeness, "Don't mind my feelings; laugh all you want. You win the peaches, Susan, but I've salvaged something." To their amazement he drew from under his coat a tiny, squirming, black kitten, that regarded the world with scared eyes and opened a pink mouth in a voiceless mew.

"Some kitten!" remarked Robert Bruce. "Hardly more than got its eyes open, and it was up a tree so tall I thought at first I couldn't climb it." He looked ruefully at a torn trouser-leg and a sleeve that bore traces of the adventure. "Afraid to come down, of course. There was a wretched little yapping dog dancing 'round at the foot of the tree, telling the world how smart he was. I chased him!"

"I believe you've been up one of those trees near Mr. Nelson's," his Cousin Jean said incredulously. "Why, boy, it takes a good, long ladder to get started on those trees."

"I could have used one if I'd had it," admitted Robert Bruce. "I almost came on to find you first, but I hated to leave the little thing there. Do you mind if I keep it, Cousin Jean? I'd sort of like to have some little live thing of my own."

"Why, of course—unless it belongs to someone who wants it. Jim can find that out for you, can't you, son?"

"I'll try. But I'm sure by the way it looks at

Brucey that he belongs to it. See how it's trying to squirm back under his coat."

"Don't disappear till I introduce you to Rex." Brucey detached the little clinging thing from his coat, and held it, safely protected, near the big dog. "Rex, meet Kip," he said politely. "He's going to join your family, and you must be good to him." Then, because the kitten began to hump and spit, he removed him hastily. "Here, that's no way to begin a lifelong friendship. You should say 'pleased to meet you.'"

"What made you think of Kip for a name?" Susan inquired. She did not care for kittens, and it surprised her to find that Brucey did.

"Short for Kipling—my favorite writer," he explained. He was gently tucking the kitten into his largest pocket as he spoke.

"Those were Kipling's words you were singing, weren't they?" asked Mrs. Sheldon. "But where did you get that music?"

Color flamed in the boy's cheeks and he bent his head to peer at the kitten. "Oh, that's nothing—when I like the words I just roar out whatever comes to me as I go along. Am I too late to get anything to eat? Tree climbing is hungry work."

"We haven't much for a real appetite," admitted Mrs. Sheldon, as she took some sandwiches out of waxed paper. "Just these and some cookies."

"I'll try to make the best of it," sighed Robert Bruce, "though I could eat more."

"Where is the package you had when I saw you last?" inquired Susan. "Those peaches will look good to someone."

Robert started guiltily. "Christopher Columbus!" he said with sudden enlightenment. "I laid them down under the tree before I started to climb —and I never thought of 'em again. How 'bout it, Kip? Let's you and I go back and get 'em."

"Oh, no." Susan got up and stretched her arms skyward. "We'll go home that way, and you and Jim can find out whether anyone wants your kitten before you get too fond of him."

"I'm almost that now," said Robert Bruce quite unabashed. "I thought that we were going to sit around for awhile and hear Cousin Jean and Jim say beautiful words."

His cousin laughed. "Jimsey and I have had our party. You were both so slow in getting here. Susan, what made you late? You weren't rescuing kittens, were you?"

Secure in the knowledge that she was about to surprise her family, Susan waited an instant to heighten the effect. Then she said as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, "I? Oh, I've been calling on the Marstons. I'll tell you all about it while we're walking home."

CHAPTER IX

A RECONCILIATION

By some miracle the peaches were found untouched and presented to Motherje and Jim who, at first, refused to eat them, but yielded to Susan's imperative demands.

"That's all right; they're meant for you to eat," she said impatiently. "Pretty soon you'll have to watch me devour two." She knew, of course, that she should make Brucey eat one of them, but she had no intention of giving him an idea of the pleasure in store for him.

As a matter of fact he did not seem in the slightest degree concerned about peaches, and apparently was thinking only of the small black thing, which had emerged from his pocket and now cuddled contentedly in the crook of his arm. Kip's affairs, however, settled themselves easily, as he proved to be the unwanted member of a sizable family, and was given away with eagerness.

"Gray kittens seem more popular 'round here, Kippy," said Robert Bruce as they started on their homeward way once more. "But don't you go feeling bad about that, because I prefer black ones.

I should like it, though, if you'll kindly manage to grow yellow eyes."

"They're greeny-blue now," discouraged Susan.

"They may change; anyway, I like him because he's so friendly. Wake up, Kip, and show 'em how nice you can be. Oo-ouch, you little beggar! Your claws are like needles!" Robert withdrew his hand hastily to the tune of Susan's mirthful laughter. "Next time we'll put on the gloves," he murmured ruefully.

Susan's story of her adventure lasted until they were almost home, and was listened to with flattering interest.

"Brucey and I saw Derry cleaning up that front room one morning before breakfast," said Jim when she finished. "At least he shook something out of the window—it looked like one of those dust-mops. We shouted at him, but he bolted—never even waved at us."

"You didn't tell me that." Susan felt defrauded.

"Good reason why: you girls talk about him enough now—he can kind of feel it in the air," answered Jim with the elder-brotherly air Susan hated.

"Oh, fiddle! People needn't act so queer if they don't want to be talked about. Don't you think it's strange, Motherje, for his mother to spend her

time embroidering and make Derry do housework?" Susan demanded. "You know the other boys have seen him sweeping and putting out clothes. You'd think if they haven't much money they wouldn't need table-linen—perfectly beautiful —with handsome monograms."

"How do you know whether they have money or not? It beats all the way you girls talk about people," growled Jim. "Perhaps Derry does it for exercise—anyway, I notice he doesn't go in for athletics."

"There may be some other reason," Motherje said thoughtfully. "Possibly ——"

"Who's that on the porch?" interrupted Susan excitedly. "Excuse me, darling dear, but it's Connie and ——"

"And Uncledunk!" Robert Bruce's voice rose into a squeak. "Oh, Susan, see what they're doing. They're eating something—peaches, I'll bet."

"They brought 'em, then," asserted Susan. "You can't scare me. Oh, they see us now. I'm going to run."

She was off, followed by Jim, but Robert Bruce, repressing all his natural instincts, walked sedately beside his Cousin Jean.

"If I run I shall jar the baby," he said with a grin when she urged him not to wait for her. "Be-

sides, I'm bashful—I haven't seen Connie for five years. She looks just the same as ever—only more so."

Mrs. Sheldon laughed. "She is good to look at, isn't she? I'm so glad to have her back again. She seems to fit into the special needs of the whole family."

Connie, tall and erect, with smiling eyes and rosy cheeks, and hair the color of a shiny horse-chestnut, came running down the steps to meet them.

"Brucey, I'm glad you've come home again," she said, after she had hugged her mother. "It's quite time, and it will be fine to have you all winter."

"He and I still quarrel," remarked Susan, who, with the idea that she might have grown an inch or two, was furtively measuring herself against her sister.

"Uncle Duncan and I will decide between you," promised Connie. They were all on the porch now, and Uncle Duncan, looking not a whit older for the five years that had passed over his silvery head, came to greet them, rubbing his hands with his handkerchief.

"Connie insisted that I should eat one of the two peaches she found, and they were very juicy," he explained genially.

"The nicest peach I've ever eaten," affirmed Connie. "We were hungry and thirsty, too, and those

went to the right spot. Well, now what have I said?" She was mystified by Robert Bruce's chuckling laugh and his triumphant, tantalizing gaze at Susan.

"You haven't said anything; he's just plain foolish when he looks like that," Susan asserted stoutly. "Those were good peaches, weren't they? Connie, did you see lovely gardens while you were away?"

"Oh!" breathed Connie, and the one short word was eloquent. "Don't get me talking about them until Father comes; he would have enjoyed them so much. Uncle Duncan had such fine letters of introduction we got in everywhere."

"And Connie won the hearts of all the gardeners by taking an intelligent interest in their work and loving the gardens." Uncle Duncan beamed on Connie; he was devoted to all of them, but she was his cherished comrade.

"It was lovely." Connie's sigh signified pure bliss. "I'm wild to get a chance to plan a big garden, but no one wants to trust a novice. The Lanes are my only hope, so please keep on good terms with Edith and her mother, Susan."

"Oh, as to that I don't see ——" Susan began mutinously, but did not finish her sentence because Connie and Motherje had started to go into the house. A moment later Jim and Uncle Duncan

left the porch. No one seemed to notice that Susan was suddenly and mysteriously troubled.

All the pleasure and discomfort of her eventful day mingled in one stinging question: how was she to make peace with Edith and her mother? With the former it might not be so difficult—a little flattery, and a good deal of doing just as Edith wanted, and they would probably both be back on the same old terms. But that wasn't easy for Susan and she hated it. And more than that she couldn't believe that Mrs. Lane would ever like her again. Anyway, there was no sense in making Connie's affairs depend on her. She threw up her head defiantly and turning toward the house, almost walked over Robert Bruce.

"Come and help me feed Kip," he invited, peering around to look into her suddenly averted face. "Poor little thing! Did she lose her peaches?"

"Go away! I'm not worrying about peaches. And, anyway, I meant to give you one."

"It's a nice safe time to tell me that, I'll say," commented Brucey, and heaved a made-up sigh. "I'd like to believe you, of course——" and then, observing that she did not even smile, he tried another tack. "I will say for you that you were a good old sport not to let Connie know they were yours. I came near giving the whole thing away."

"Connie minds dreadfully if she takes something

another person wants; I couldn't let her know—at least, not when she'd just got back from—from everywhere," explained Susan, still so sober that Brucey whistled in amazement.

"For goodness' sake what is the matter? I didn't suppose you could look so solemn. Aren't you going to tell your little playmate?"

"No. And I'm not going to help you feed that kitten, either. You know you can get anything you want out of Tillie. I'm going up-stairs."

After Susan's abrupt departure Robert Bruce stood for a moment thoughtfully rubbing the kitten's neck. "Turned us down, didn't she, Kip?" he said finally. "I don't know what's bothering her, but I could just guess that it's something about that Lane girl. We'll have to sleuth it out, old dear, but milk's the first question."

Susan would have raged had she known Brucey's shrewd guess. Even without that she was thoroughly out of humor with the world. It was a trouble as big as a mountain to have Connie's possible first order depend on her. It was unfair—there was no reason for it—it would make her a slave to Edith's whims—a sudden thought made her excitement cool a little: after all probably Edith wouldn't speak when they met, and that would be the end of it. She was conscious of a feeling of relief at this solution of the problem, but

the next minute she was wondering how it would seem not to use the Lane tennis-court, and not to be invited to the parties Edith was so fond of giving.

"Oh, well, I suppose all I'll have to do will be to coax her up a bit—tell her how pretty her dress is, and how nice she looks in it. Ede loves that sort of thing. And she is good-natured." Susan sighed and brushed her yellow locks vigorously. Then she slipped into a dress which had once been her best and now was enjoying an honorable old age as a home dress for evening. All the time her mind kept up a running monologue.

"Queer that now I don't mind dressing up at all. Connie says that, when I was a kid, to put me in a clean dress was the signal for me to wallow in the mud. What funny things children are! Now that I've grown up I love to have my hands clean and my nails nice, and to wear glad clothes. Which reminds me that I must ask Connie whether that voile dress of mine will wash. Perhaps—just perhaps she'll offer to do it for me. Sweet of me to begin to make use of her right away."

Quite against her will her mind fastened itself hard and fast on the thought of how much she depended on this sister. In the next two minutes she remembered a dozen ways in which Connie was always ready to help her.

"Goodness knows I ought to be willing to make up with Edith for Connie's sake if I wouldn't for my own," she sighed, and felt an instant satisfaction, because this made it seem that it was her sister's welfare, and not the urge of tennis-court and parties which had decided her.

She must try to get Motherje alone before bedtime and tell her what she had done this morning to offend Mrs. Lane. Perhaps if she hurried now she could find a chance before dinner.

She made a dive into her closet for slippers, and emerged firm in the purpose to clear out that closet when Saturday came. A hasty search for a handkerchief made her resolve to have a general going-over of bureau drawers. She wondered if people ought to have standards about closets and bureau drawers as well as about bed-making and—and school. Probably! At the present moment just living comfortably with one's friends seemed a big enough problem without bothering about standards.

The next moment she reached the top of the stairs just as Rose and her father opened the front door. That was the signal for a welcoming rush from Connie, and a more leisurely greeting from Uncle Duncan. To Susan, looking down, it seemed as if the entire family were there in an instant, and she gave up at once all idea of a private talk with either Daddy or Motherje before bed-

time. The next minute she had precipitated herself into the midst of things without further delay.

Like many of the troubles one worries most about the matter of a reconciliation with Edith was taken quite out of Susan's hands and adjusted with little difficulty. It happened Monday morning when she was on her way to school. By pleasant chance Frances and Peggy were in sight when she reached their corner, and she waited for them.

"Glad we met you," Frances said at once. "We want to talk to you about something—oh, there's Edith. Come on; come on," she called clearly. "We have a plan, and you're part of it; we can't do it without you."

Susan turned quickly and suspected at once that if Frances had not called, Edith would not have tried to catch up with them. There was a momentary hesitation, and then she came slowly toward them.

"What's up?" she asked, not bothering to greet them. "You're always having some grand idea, Fran; what is it now?" She gave an indifferent, half-welcoming glance at the other two girls, and Susan tried to nod and smile as usual. The thought that this meeting was, perhaps, the beginning of a reconciliation put an added warmth into her smile, and Edith's sulkiness lessened a little.

"Well, it's this," explained Frances, trying to put it into as few words as possible, because they were nearing the schoolhouse. "You remember that trio we practised last winter; my mother wants us to give it at a meeting of her club. And Peggy's invited to sing a song or two. Of course, being my mother, she took it for granted that I'd do my part, so it depends on Edith and Susan."

"I suppose I could manage the piano ——" Susan was beginning, when Edith interrupted.

"I don't believe we shall be in town for the meeting," she said indifferently. "My father is thinking of taking us all to Florida for the winter. Perhaps he'll sell this house. We may never come back to Melford."

At another time these threatening statements would not have worried Susan; she had learned to wait with calmness for events predicted by Edith. But now—after what Connie had said ——

"Oh, Edie, we can't play it without you; you're our star performer," she pleaded. "Get your father to change his mind. You said he'd do anything for you."

"It's no use if you won't come in with us," put in Frances. "Not that I mind so much if we don't play it. I've got plenty of school-work to fill the rosy hours." She ended with a sigh and shifted a pile of books from one arm to the other.

"It will be too bad to disappoint your mother, Fran," murmured Susan, who hated to give up so easily. Her mind was already busy over the problem of what would happen if Mr. Lane sold his house. Strangers there! No one caring for Connie! No chance to play tennis!

"Fran's mother loves your playing, Edie," she persisted. "There isn't another girl we know who can touch you on playing the violin." She was speaking in all sincerity, for this was the thing she admired most in Edith—the one thing in which she had persevered to the point of excellent results. It was an enormous relief to be able really to feel the enthusiasm Susan wanted to express.

Edith's ungraciousness lessened slightly. "Oh, well, I don't mind doing it if we're here, and perhaps we shall be. Father gets those ideas once in awhile, but they don't always work out." She was silent a moment and then added half to herself, "I suppose it's because Mother and I are so lonesome here."

They were going up the steps of the schoolhouse now, and, because others were hurrying, they hurried also. No one answered Edith's last remark, though each of the three girls was acutely conscious of it, and each was interpreting it in her own way.

Susan, not for a moment understanding how any-

one with a fine house, and an absolutely perfect tennis-court, and so much money to spend could feel lonely, was nevertheless stirred to unexpected feeling. It must be dreadful to be lonesome—as bad as to be ill or in pain. Involuntarily she tucked her hand under Edith's arm and they went up the last few steps together.

Going part of the way home from school that afternoon with Jim and Robert Bruce, Susan stopped a minute on the porch to finish an argument.

She had parted from Edith, Frances and Peggy just before the boys caught up with her. The girls had walked together in perfect harmony, and had amicably agreed upon the day and hour for the first rehearsal of the trio. By this time, Edith, who had had an unusually good day in school, was quite sure that her father could be persuaded to give up the idea of selling the Melford house, so the ultimate fate of the trio seemed assured. On the whole Susan felt that her former relationship to Edith had been reëstablished with no trouble at all.

In spite of this peaceful frame of mind she did not hesitate to rise to the bait which Brucey threw out to her in the shape of a remark about Edith's way of dressing.

"She looks as if she was fussed up for a party when she goes to school," he said in his most critical

manner. "Now I like the looks of those other two girls much better."

"They'll be pleased. I'll tell 'em what you say," Susan answered with a readiness that promised mischief.

"Why do girls have to run and tattle the minute they hear anything? For cat's sake don't tell the Edith-girl what I said; I can see her face if you did."

"It's ignoble of you ——" Susan had begun in a severe tone, but stopped to admire herself for her choice of words. "'Ignoble!' Why, Jimsey, that's as good a word as you could think up right off like that."

"'Ignoble. Ignoble,'" repeated her brother as if he were testing it. "It's a good enough word all right, but I don't like the sound of it, do you? I suppose they made it *ig* so's not to have *in* or *un* for the first syllable. I must look that up." He walked toward the front door murmuring, "innoble—unnoble—ignoble," under his breath.

"Now, see what you've done," Robert Bruce accused. "He's at it again. He'll crawl inside the dictionary and I shan't get anything out of him for hours."

Jim chuckled. "No, I shan't—wish I could, though," he added regretfully. "It's like a game," he went on to explain. "I look up a word, and

there's a fifty-fifty chance that there'll be a word in the definition I don't understand. So I look that up and probably the same thing happens. When I get to the place where I understand every word I have to stop."

"Silly!" Susan's scorn was too deep to be expressed in a single word, but she did her best. "I'm going to buy you a box of blocks with letters on them for Christmas."

Jim smiled at her peacefully. "Good for you, Sis. That was what you might call a scathing remark. Well, I've got to get busy; I promised Father I'd take the screens off this afternoon. I think it's almost too warm, though. Guess I'd better go in and ask Mother."

"I'll help you do it," Robert Bruce called after him, as Jim went into the house whistling. "Let me know when you decide.

"Have a chair, Susan," he went on. "If he gets to discussing 'ignoble' and other words with Cousin Jean it'll be some time before we see him again."

"That word reminds me—why don't you like Edith?"

Susan's question was unexpected, and Robert frowned.

"I'm an idiot. I hoped you'd forgotten that and then I went and reminded you. I don't have to

dislike her, do I, just because I don't fancy the way she togs up for school?"

"No; but, all the same, you don't like her, do you?" Susan persisted, fixing him with a stern eye.

"Well—I don't really know her—I ought not to give an opinion, anyway." Brucey was trying to wriggle out of an unpleasant situation. He realized that his feeling about Edith hadn't an explainable foundation. One couldn't say like a child, "because I don't," but that was about the only reason he could give.

"I've got to stop making up my mind about people the very first minute," he growled, and then added with a chuckle, "See me stop now." And that was all Susan could get out of him.

"Didn't you say it was ignoble to talk the way I did?" he teased, when tired of coaxing and demanding she had relapsed into pretended indifference. "If you want to, though, you might tell me why you don't like her."

"I! What makes you think that, I should like to know? As it happens, I do. Anyway, to-day I'm sorry for her, because she said she's lonesome—and, somehow, I believe she meant it."

"'Lonesome!'" Brucey repeated the word incredulously. "Lonesome! Oh, I say—yes, all right, I'm coming, Jim—but lonesome—oh, stop your racket, Sheldon; I'm coming, I tell you." He

was off with a slam of the screen door that made Susan jump.

She sat there on the porch alone, staring across the open field on the other side of the street to where distant purple hills arrested her gaze.

"Mr. Brucey doesn't know as much as he thinks he does," she said to herself after awhile. "Edith really meant that when she said it. I don't see, though——"

Someone walking rapidly on the other side of the street made Susan focus her gaze on the nearer view. It was the Marston boy—Derry Marston, she corrected herself unconsciously, and she wondered if he would look across the street or straight ahead, as he usually did.

She was ready to bow in friendly fashion, she even meditated asking for his mother, but he seemed to have no such neighborly ideas. When he had almost gone by, when she had given up the idea of any recognition, he turned suddenly in her direction, took off his hat, and went straight on as if afraid of being spoken to if he lingered.

Susan was so surprised that the friendly bow of her planning became a jerky nod with no smile to grace it.

"Goodness! He'll think I didn't mean to bow at all," she said to herself in dismay. And then, with her mind still running on what Edith had

said, "Talk about being lonesome! That boy's face fairly shouts lonesomeness. Oh, dear! It's all too much for me. I'm going in and talk to Mother and Connie."

CHAPTER X

UNCLE DUNCAN LISTENS IN

"GIVE me that A again, please, Susan. I can't keep this string up to pitch." Frances bent her head over her 'cello and tried the string critically.

"It's the dampness," remarked Edith. "You're a fusser, Fran. Mine are all a shade off, but why worry?" She drew her bow across the strings with a flourish, and tapped her foot impatiently. If she didn't bother about a thing like that, why should Frances who hadn't had half her training? "Oh, do stop fidgeting with that string! I won't practise any more if you don't."

"All right." Frances kept her voice steady and pleasant, but she could not forbear a significant glance at Susan who had swung around in the piano chair, and her expression said a great deal.

Peggy, standing at the window, looking out at the rain-swept street, turned sharply as if to say something in defence of her chum, but the rapping of Edith's violin-bow kept her silent.

"Let's begin," Edith said dominantly. "Now, tum tum te-um tum, Susan. Eight measures before we begin, Fran. Let's play it once more and

call it a day; I'm getting tired of the old thing. Why don't you turn for Susan, Peggy, instead of mooning out of the window?" With a comprehensive gesture she swept them all into place and action.

Susan, who knew by heart the eight measures of introduction, found herself carrying on an independent line of thought. Edith certainly could make others get busy and do things even if she wasn't very particular about tuning. That was one difference between the two girls: Francy wanted to do everything as perfectly as possible, and Edith didn't care how she did it. Probably she would be as particular as Frances about tuning when they played before an audience. Susan brought her mind back to the piano forcibly. For an instant she had a wild fear that her place was lost; then her eye lighted on the right measure and she played on capably.

Edith's violin soared and trembled and thrilled; the 'cello sang a sweet, sustaining alto; the long-suffering piano did its best to live up to its companions.

Uncle Duncan, who, quite unperceived by the musicians, had come quietly into the room through the doorway at the other end, sank into his favorite chair and prepared to enjoy himself thoroughly. It was astonishing what the young people of the

present day could do, he was thinking. He loved the mellow notes of the 'cello, but the girl with the violin made her instrument talk. He had met the little girl who was turning the leaves for Susan; yes, and the one with the 'cello, but with the violinist he was not yet acquainted.

He was at the other end of the long living-room, quite away from the piano, and he softly turned his chair so that its high back came between him and the girls. This allowed him to stretch his feet toward the blaze of the open fire. They wouldn't mind, he was sure, if he sat here and listened to the music. He couldn't announce himself now, but he would as soon as they had finished what they were playing.

From where he was sitting he could see the doorway into the front hall and a bit of the hall itself reflected in a mirror; he would keep watch and warn anyone who was coming in. A few minutes later, disregarding his commendable purpose, he closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the chair; after all there was no nicer way to listen to music than with one's eyes shut.

Almost immediately a slight sound made him open them again, and he saw, reflected in the mirror, Robert Bruce smiling at him from the hall. The next minute Jimsey appeared in the mirror, and with him, a boy whom Uncle Duncan didn't know

—a boy with dark eyes and hair, and a serious face.

Uncle Duncan put his finger to his lips and shook his head in warning. The boys had no idea, however, of coming in, and Jim and Brucey went through a highly dramatic pantomime to prove it. The third boy watched them, smiling a little, but still with a detached air, as if he were not quite sure that he wanted to be there.

"The rascals! They hoped their monkey-shines would make me laugh out loud." Uncle Duncan waved his hand to Robert Bruce as the boys went up-stairs. "Who's the other chap, I wonder, and what's he got on his mind? He looks too sober for a boy."

Uncle Duncan's eyelids fluttered and dropped; it was bound to make one drowsy to look steadily in a mirror. If he shut his eyes he should be sure to hear any intruders.

Somewhat later he was torn from slumber by the sound of a voice raised in distress.

"Oh-oo! Susan! Why didn't you tell me it was hot? You always have such de-licious chocolate that I took a lot—right off. Oh-oo!"

"Sorry! Hot chocolate sometimes is hot. Try a little cold water, Edie." That was Susan speaking.

Then someone else whom Uncle Duncan guessed

to be the girl who had been turning the leaves, said anxiously, "I hope you haven't burned your tongue so that you can't tell us that adventure of yours."

"Oh, I think I can manage to wiggle it. It wasn't a real adventure—just a—a happening. Wait till I've eaten one of those cakes; playing makes me hungry."

In the other end of the room Uncle Duncan stirred uneasily. He knew that he ought either to announce himself and meet the girls, or slip out without letting them know he had been there.

Before he could decide which plan of action to adopt, the girl with the burnt tongue—he should recognize that rather unpleasant voice of hers anywhere now—had begun to speak again. Besides that he could hear the boys talking in the upper hall; evidently they were about to come down, and perhaps he'd better wait until they were out of the house. He hesitated.

"Well, it wasn't so much," the girl began. She interrupted almost everything she said with little bursts of laughter which Uncle Duncan found annoying. "It's just that I got ambitious and took a walk late yesterday afternoon, and when I was coming back I found myself near the bungalow where the Marston boy lives." She laughed, as if this in itself were a most humorous happening, and then went on.

"I was crazy to have a peep into the house, but I couldn't think of the least excuse. And then I had a brilliant idea. A puppy had followed me from the last house I had passed—the cutest thing—but I didn't dare take him home with me—so I picked him up and walked up to the door with him.

"The Marston boy came to the door, and, will you believe it, I couldn't think of a thing to say but 'Oh, is this where you live?'"

"Was he as brilliant as that when he answered?" demanded Susan, interrupting Edith's prolonged laughter.

"Just about. All he said was 'Yes.' And then he looked at me solemnly and waited for me to go on. Believe me, his manner would have frozen you.

"Of course there was nothing for me to do but explain that the puppy was following me, and I wanted to know if it belonged there.

"I was awfully polite, but I strung it out as long as possible so that I could get a good look at his mother. She was sewing on some big white thing and she didn't pay any attention to me at all.

"She must have heard, though, because she told him where the dog lived and said it followed her the other day. Then he offered to take it home for me."

"That was nice of him, I'm sure." To Uncle Duncan's ear Susan's voice sounded as if she were defending someone.

"Nice enough. But talk about icebergs! It makes my teeth chatter to think of him. I was sure he'd invite me in—I really thought he'd be crazy to have his mother meet me. He knows who I am, of course."

There was an irrepressible gurgle of laughter from one of the girls, and Uncle Duncan smiled with her. It was the girl who played the 'cello, he thought. At any rate it was she who spoke next.

"Oh, Edith, you're delicious. Why should he be crazy to have you come in and meet his mother?"

"Why, with our house and our—our—well, couldn't we do a great deal for strangers if we chose to?" This time Edith did not laugh, and there was a note of irritation in her voice.

Uncle Duncan smiled. It was not the first time he had heard someone trying to explain his own importance to those who failed to see it. The next moment he realized that the boys were coming down-stairs.

He heard Jim say softly, "Wait a second while Brucey and I get our raincoats and we'll go along with you." Then by curious chance the reflection of the third boy came squarely into the mirror and stayed there. Uncle Duncan felt an instant liking

for the sturdy, erect figure and well-shaped head. "I wish the chap would turn around and let me have a good look at his face," he said to himself.

"I told my father about them." It was the girl named Edith going on about her so-called adventure again. For some reason it made Uncle Duncan nervous to listen to her, but he couldn't escape at this moment.

"I told him how top-lofty they are, and that they don't seem to want to know anyone, and he said the name seemed familiar to him. There was a man named Marston who got into trouble about money awhile ago. He was in a—a Trust Company and he took money or—or something. Dad isn't sure whether he was sent to prison or not." Edith's manner became increasingly vague. She had expected to make a sensation, but she had the feeling that they did not believe her.

Uncle Duncan, still looking at the boy in the mirror, saw him wheel suddenly and take a step toward the living-room. His face was white and his eyes proudly resentful. The next instant two other boyish figures were fleetingly reflected, and the third turned and departed with them.

"There must be hundreds of Marstons. I don't see how anyone can be sure it is the same family." This was Susan's voice with something cutting and

forceful in it. The silent listener wanted to applaud the doubt she expressed; instead he slipped out of the room and stole up-stairs.

In the living-room the conversation went on.

"I think it's foolish—just because his name is Marston," Susan persisted. "Is your father sure about the name, and ——"

"Why, yes, I s'pose so," Edith interrupted pettishly. She had an indistinct memory of hearing the name Marvin, also, as if, between the two, her father were not quite sure. That was hardly worth mentioning, though, Anyway, she was tired of talking about this now.

"I must go home," she announced. "I don't believe we need another rehearsal. I'm sick and tired of it now, aren't you? Let's give up doing it, anyway."

"Let's not," argued Peggy promptly. "That would be the silliest thing ever, and Fran's mother would be awfully disappointed."

"I don't see what you have to say about it; you only turn the leaves."

"She's going to sing," began Frances hotly, and then cooled down. "Mother will be disappointed; she's counting on us."

"Let's have one more rehearsal just before the club meeting." Susan came into the discussion with a complete disregard of the possibility of

giving up the performance. "Please, Edith. You do it so much better than Fran and I that probably you don't need one, but we do."

"Well—all right. I suppose we ought to have one with Fran's piano, because we're going to play at her house." The right note had been struck, and Edith's manner had softened. Susan sighed with relief.

"Here's our car." Edith was looking out of the window. "Hurry, girls. You're lucky not to have to lug that 'cello home in the rain, Fran. Water would just about ruin it."

"She wouldn't ——" began Susan, and stopped. What was the use of picking up every little thing Edith said, or noticing her lofty manner? She busied herself in helping the girls get together their belongings.

Peggy, hanging back an instant as the other two left the house, said softly, "If it weren't for the rain I'd like to stay and try over the songs. We must go over them with Fran's piano." Then, with a mirthful glance, "Of course I couldn't miss the rare chance of going home in a stylish automobubble even if jitneys are better suited to my humble station."

She laughed and ran after the others, but the next moment she was back again. "Susan," she said soberly, "I don't believe what Edith said about

that boy's father. I think it was horrid. Let's not breathe a word of it to anyone. I'll tell Fran, and she won't, I'm sure."

"Of course not," agreed Susan. "I'm glad ——" but Peggy was flying down the path in response to repeated calls from Edith. Susan waved and watched and finally shut the front door with her mind in a whirl.

Why did Edith act that way and keep them all wondering as to whether she would or would not do the things they had planned? It was almost always so, she reflected. Edith had to be coaxed and managed, and even now Susan was not sure that she might not change her ideas within the next ten days and leave them in the lurch.

"I'd like to give her a piece of my mind," she said to herself, as she carried the chocolate cups into the kitchen and hastily washed them. It was one of Motherje's few rules that extra work of this kind should not be left to Tillie.

Housework suggested Derry Marston. She wondered if he liked it as little as she did. Anyway, he seemed to have to do it. Perhaps he could cook, too. Jim and Brucey were terribly conceited over their camp cooking, but they wouldn't find it so much fun if they were obliged to do it at home. It was queer that Derry's mother—Susan stopped short in wiping a saucer and reflected. What if

that should be true that Edith had said about his father! Perhaps that would explain their coming to live in a little house on the edge of the woods, and not wanting to know anyone.

Susan set down the saucer with such emphasis that the sound of it brought her to herself. "I needn't break the dishes if I am sorry for him. But if that's true it must be awful." She finished washing and putting away the dishes with a serious face. "I don't believe that's so," she said to herself finally. "Edith makes things sound true even when she isn't sure of them herself. I shan't believe it."

In her fervor the last four words became vocal, and she jumped in surprise when someone behind her said:

"I shouldn't. What is it?"

"Oh, Brucey, why do you steal in that way? I'm not going to tell. You shouldn't eavesdrop on people's thoughts. That wasn't meant to be said aloud."

Robert Bruce, who had come through the back door into the kitchen, took time from his anguished contemplation of himself to bestow a reproachful look on Susan.

"Say, I didn't know I was so drenched as this," he went on plaintively. "That's the wettest walk I ever took. I shall be an island pretty soon.

Help! Help!" He was looking with increasing dismay at the water dripping from his coat and tall boots, and rapidly making a ring around him.

"I suppose you expect me to get the mop," Susan said severely. "Tillie's just washed the floor. What did you come in here for, anyway? Cookies?"

"No. I saw you through the window and I wanted to speak to you. Jim had sense enough to drop his raincoat and boots on the front porch and slide up-stairs to get the first bath. I meant to leave mine on the back porch, but I forgot and walked straight in. Say, just slide that rubber mat over to me, will you? There's a good little girl."

Susan tossed her head, but pushed the mat across the floor.

Robert Bruce, having secured it, tugged off his wet boots, dropped off his raincoat, and bunched it on the mat. Then he pulled the mat by one corner across the room and out on the back porch, whence he returned with the mop.

"There, doesn't that look almost as good as new?" he demanded a few minutes later. "Tillie will never know." Then he padded out with the mop and came back looking very self-satisfied. "Some little manager I am, if I do say it." He dropped into a chair near the stove, and his kitten,

taking a drying-off nap, emerged from underneath and leaped to his knee, almost missing the goal, but clinging with claws like needles.

"Jee-rusalem Crickets! Kip, I'm going to have your nails filed. Here, withdraw those daggers and sit on my shoulder."

Kip, enthroned on his master's shoulder, promptly descended to the coveted knee where he could have the under side of his chin scratched, and his ears pulled.

"Where've you been?" Susan demanded. "What's the wettest walk? What did you want to see me for?"

"Say, Kip, girls can ask questions, can't they? I can't remember the answer to the last question, but I can tell you the others."

"Oh, dear, I hoped you knew something nice someone had said about me." Susan repressed a yawn. "I don't care about the answers to the other two questions. I'm going up-stairs to study."

"Don't be haughty. I do know something nice." Brucey, in the felt shoes he wore under his storm-boots, went softly along after her with Kip in the bend of his arm. "I remember now that was why I wanted to find you before Jim had a chance to tell you."

Susan sat down on the third stair in the front hall

and tried not to look interested. "Go on," she said grudgingly. She never knew what to expect from Brucey. It was more than likely to be a joke on her.

"Oh, it isn't much of anything," said Robert Bruce, beginning, as Susan thought, to wriggle out of it. "We walked home with Derry Marston this afternoon, and old Jim asked him if his mother was better." He paused to adjust Kip into a more compact ball, and Susan waited impatiently.

"Hurry up! I've got to study." She wished she could be as indifferent as she was trying to appear, but she hated to go away without finding out whether there really was anything interesting in Brucey's story.

"Well, Derry said his mother was better, and then—just to make Jim feel good, I suppose, he tacked on that you were very nice and helpful that day."

"Huh! Nice and helpful! That all?"

"Well, I believe he did say that he was scared out of his wits, and you were as calm as—as a summer sea," ended Brucey in a sudden burst of inspiration.

"I don't believe he ever said that about a summer sea," Susan remarked coldly.

"Well, it was like that—it was something about being calm. If you can think of anything you pre-

fer we'll choose that. Anyway, he remembers you pleasantly—if at all." Brucey grinned at her mischievously, and waited for an explosion which did not come.

"Did he invite you and Jim to come in when you got to the house?" Susan asked with assumed carelessness.

"No. At least I don't remember hearing him say anything of the kind. He knew we were going for a walk. Besides he——" the boy stopped as if he had changed his mind about going further.

"He—what?" questioned Susan sharply.

"Why, he seemed kind of strange—he's sober and quiet enough usually, but he was more so today, especially the last part of the time. Oh, hello, Uncledunk! Coming down?" Robert Bruce looked up the stairs with the glance of affectionate welcome which he accorded to Uncle Duncan at every meeting.

Susan scrambled to her feet to let Uncle Duncan pass. She wished that he had waited a few moments; she would have liked to make Brucey tell her a little more about the walk with Derry.

"You'll be late to dinner, son, if you don't hurry. Jim's been splashing in the tub like a walrus, and it's your turn now." Uncle Duncan tousled the sandy hair and put his arm around the boy.

"All right, sir." Robert Bruce was just as well pleased to go before Susan had another chance at him; he knew her persistency when she wanted to find out anything. Nevertheless he was still lingering when Uncle Duncan said abruptly:

"Susan, I owe you an apology. When I came home in the rain this afternoon I wanted more than anything else to sit before the fire, and I invaded your rehearsal without asking permission. It was very impolite."

"That's all right. But why didn't you come and meet the girls? You have met Peggy and Fran, but not Edith."

Quite unobserved, Brucey made up a face and mounted two steps of the stairs. If they were going to talk about the Edith-girl he didn't care about staying.

"I went in softly," Uncle Duncan explained, "because, at that moment, you were in full swing and I didn't want to disturb you. Then I turned my big chair so that I could toast my toes, and then —well, the music was beautifully soothing, and I was forty-winking before I knew it."

Uncle Duncan's eyes fell before Susan's like those of a guilty boy. "I'm sorry I wasn't more polite."

"I was hoping you could tell me how the trio sounded."

"What I heard was great. Is Edith the one who wields a violin bow so gracefully?"

Robert Bruce, on the fourth stair, took two more steps upward. He wondered why he was hanging around in this way, and wished they would drop Edith and talk of something really interesting.

"Yes. Doesn't she do it well? I get quite fond of her when her violin is tucked under her chin and she's in a good mood."

"Not always fond of her, then?" Uncle Duncan's question was unexpected, and Brucey, who had attained eight stairs, quietly stepped back two. "I fancied she seemed a bit—well, perhaps, arrogant would be the word."

"She *is* bossy," Susan admitted. "But she does play well, and—and she's nice about some things."

"That's right—that's perfectly right," Uncle Duncan answered hastily. "It's much nicer, of course, to count up a person's good points than her bad ones." Then without thinking of the difficulties into which he was precipitating himself, he asked, "Robert, who was the fine-looking lad with you and Jim this afternoon?"

Susan turned hastily, aware for the first time of Brucey's halting progress on the stairs. "I thought you'd gone," she said, rejoicing that she

had not confided to Uncle Duncan her inmost feelings about Edith. "If you don't hustle you'll be late to dinner. There's Jim now, all spick and spandy."

"What's up now?" asked Jim. "Say, young Bruce, I was sweet enough, as my little sister would say, to draw a bath for you. I didn't expect you to be years getting to it, though."

"Well, I have to answer Uncle's question, don't I? That was Marston, Uncledunk. He came in to see Jim's stamps."

"What!" exclaimed Susan. "Not Derry Marston! Not this afternoon!" And then more calmly, "Did Motherje see him? Why didn't you bring him in to see the girls?"

"Motherje and Connie were out," Jim answered. "And the music was going on at such a lively pace that, of course, we couldn't interrupt."

"Oh," breathed Susan with an intense relief that only one of her audience could appreciate. "But how could you see him, Uncle Duncan?"

"In the mirror when we were in the hall," put in Brucey with a chuckle. "He was afraid we were going to disturb the music, and we were trying to make him sure that we wouldn't go in if we could."

"That was when we came into the house," Jim added. "I forgot to look for you when we came

down-stairs. Did you see us? We left Marston in the hall while we got our raincoats."

"Hm-hm. I believe I did," confessed Uncle Duncan unwillingly.

"Do you remember what we were doing or—or saying about that time?" asked Susan, trying to conceal her anxiety under a stony calm.

"Well, there had been a cheerful noise of cups and spoons, and the young person named Edith had laughed and talked a good deal," Uncle Duncan began. He was feeling his way, and wishing heartily that he had not asked his unlucky question as to the identity of the boy.

"Why didn't you put up a sign saying that refreshments were being served?" grumbled Robert Bruce who, by this time, had reached the top of the stairs. "I shouldn't have been so shy about coming in if I'd known that. Well, by-by till dinner-time."

"Uncle Duncan, did you hear all that Edith said?" Susan continued with the same air of suppressed anxiety.

"Well, I can't say whether I did or not. Of course, if I didn't hear all, I shouldn't know that I hadn't heard all, should I? Answer me that, young lady."

Susan stared blankly at him, as if her mind refused to work on so intricate a problem as this.

Jim laughed. "That's one on you, Susanna. By the way, Uncle Duncan, what was that article you were telling me about this morning? I'd like to have a go at it before dinner. That's the very best time to read."

"It's in the *Literary Digest,* and the magazine is on the table in the living-room. You go and find it, and I'll be in there right away. I want to talk to you about it."

As soon as Jim had disappeared Uncle Duncan stepped close to Susan. "I heard what you are hoping the boy didn't hear, and he heard it, too," he said softly.

"How could you tell he heard it?" gasped Susan.

"Because I saw his face in the mirror the moment after it was said."

"Isn't that the most awful thing? What are we going to do about it?" Susan left the problem to Uncle Duncan with touching confidence.

"I want a chance to think this over," he said slowly. "Right now I'm not believing a bit in that girl's story—it was guesswork, I'm almost sure. If I were you I wouldn't say anything to anyone—not even to Jim and Robert Bruce. They can be more natural with the poor fellow if they don't hear this. Anyway, it's bad business spreading gossip; even if it isn't true it creates an atmosphere of—of distressful doubt." Uncle Duncan

scowled and shook his head. "My word, Susan," he ended irritably, "I've got my claws out for persons who pass around stories like that—whether they're true or not."

"So have I," agreed Susan. "Don't you suppose you can get acquainted with the Marston boy? You're such a comfort when anyone is in trouble, or doesn't know what to do."

"Well, perhaps I can—perhaps I can." Uncle Duncan's brown eyes had smiling lights in them, though his face was grave. He was liking very much this trustfully confiding Susan, so different from the self-assertive young person with whom he was most familiar. He put out his hand.

"Let's go into partnership," he said seriously. "There isn't much we can do, perhaps, but let's lie low and hunt for something that will make that boy happier."

"'And Bre'r Rabbit, he lay low,'" quoted Susan with a strong grip of Uncle Duncan's friendly hand. Then she ran up-stairs feeling strangely comforted, and glad from the bottom of her heart that she had not seen Derry Marston's face when Edith was talking.

CHAPTER XI

THE WINNING LADY

With Uncle Duncan at the helm, Susan felt confident the ship of discovery would move at once. In spite of her faith, however, nothing happened, and Derry Marston, once having been in the Sheldon house, seemed no more likely to come again. In fact, after that one visit, his sober avoidance of hospitality and pleasure was more marked than ever. Even Jim and Brucey saw little of him, though both made repeated efforts to draw him into comradeship.

True to her word Peggy never mentioned what Edith had said, and neither did Frances. To Susan's surprise, Edith, herself, was silent about it. After awhile Susan stopped waking each morning with the exciting feeling that the day might bring some explanation of the puzzle.

"Of course if people don't want it you can't hand out your sympathy to them, can you?" she observed to Uncle Duncan one afternoon when they had seen Derry pass the house.

"Hardly," he answered, frowning a little.

"We'll just have to stand by and be ready to help if the time comes."

"I'm going to forget it," Susan said decidedly. "I have troubles of my own."

"You look it." Uncle Duncan's laughing eyes questioned her quizzically. "Confide in me."

"It's no joke and I don't want to confide in anyone. But do you think"—Susan paused impressively—"do you think if anyone wants to—to employ a person he ought to let it depend on what a—a third person feels about a fourth person? Particularly when the third—man is very changeable." She felt very crafty, almost deceptive, in saying man.

Uncle Duncan shook his head slowly. He was always so gratifyingly serious about such things. "Rather complicated, isn't it?" he said finally. "I should suppose it would be safer for the first person to depend on his own judgment as to the second person, rather than on what the third—er—man thinks about the fourth. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly. You're a darling," answered Susan, and gave him a hug that took his breath away. She had a sudden temptation to be confidential, but Connie and Rose came into the room at that moment, and there was no further chance.

It was the question of not having made her peace

with Edith's mother which was worrying her. Of course, as soon as she had told Motherje about it, they had decided that Susan must apologize as fully as she could without blaming Edith and let it go at that. But Mrs. Lane was away for awhile, and after that, dreading explanations and apologies, Susan had kept waiting for the perfect moment when no one else should be around. And now weeks had gone by, and it seemed to her too late to do anything about it.

When she met Mrs. Lane, though nothing was said or done to remind her, she fancied that that lady always looked at her as if she were seeing an impolite girl wilfully slipping out of an automobile while she was being most cordially urged to do something for her own pleasure.

At the highest flight of Susan's imagination she could hear Mrs. Lane say to her husband, " I don't believe I should let Connie Sheldon plan the garden. If she's like Susan she would start things and leave them whenever she felt like it—for no reason at all."

When she reached this point in her meditations Susan invariably shook her curly head violently and said, " Silly goose! " meaning herself and not Mrs. Lane, of course. Then she plunged into doing something that would make her forget her troubles.

It was hard for her to forget, however, when she

saw Connie bringing home an armful of garden books from the library. Following her father's advice, Connie had decided to plan a garden for the Lanes just as she should like best to have it, and, now that the evenings were long, she and Daddy heaped the table with books and discussed plans and sketches.

Late one afternoon, coming from Edith's house, and hurrying down the long driveway because the keen autumn air struck her sharply, Susan almost collided with her sister who had been taking a walk around the outside of the Lane property.

Edith had seemed unusually irritating and lofty, and it was doubly pleasant to walk home with Connie who always soothed hurt feelings in one way or another. Susan tucked her arm under her sister's and snuggled closely against her. A feeling of contentment came over her.

"Br-r-r! It's chillsome. Why are you walking so slowly?"

"I was building air-gardens," confessed Connie. "When we were planning last evening Father and I couldn't remember just how the other side of this place looked, so I've been around it."

"Oh, goodness!" murmured Susan, thinking with regret of the rather unpleasant afternoon she had passed with Edith. And then, "Connie, would it be the biggest disappointment of your life

if you didn't plan that garden? I mean really plan it—not just what you are doing now."

"Well, perhaps the biggest of my life so far," Connie admitted with her characteristic honesty. "But, then, I've never had any very big disappointment, so that isn't saying much. It's really foolish to think of it, though, for I've only the least bit of encouragement to go on. All I heard was that Mr. Lane once said, perhaps he'd get that Miss Connie Sheldon to look over his garden some time." Connie laughed over the slight fabric of her hopes, but there was no answering laughter from her sister.

"He's probably forgotten it by this time," Susan remarked gloomily. "I don't believe he'd ever trust a beginner with a big garden like that, do you?" She was in a mood when she felt that she must not let Connie cherish an idea that was sure to come to grief.

"Oh, I don't know. You never can tell. Everyone has to begin sometime." There may have been a dulling of her light-heartedness, but Connie was cheerful again as she went on. "At any rate, it's splendid practice for me to make these plans, and I can probably use them sometime."

"Well, I shouldn't depend on this garden if I were you," Susan persisted, firm in her purpose to make the ultimate downfall of these high hopes less

of a shock. As soon as the words were spoken she was afraid that her sister would wonder, and ask why she was so certain of this, but, to her relief, Connie went on talking without a question.

"You accomplish more if you have something definite to work for," she said in her convincing way. "Now there's Roger. I had a letter from him this morning, and he's working like a beaver on plans for a country house. If his are accepted it will be a big thing for him."

"Hope he wins, I'm sure. If he does why don't you get him to recommend you for the garden architect? Now I call that a bright idea. Brighter still! Why don't you two go into partnership? That way you could plan both house and garden."

"That would be convenient, wouldn't it? But suppose I didn't like Roger's house, or he objected to my ideas for a garden," laughed Connie. "Then the firm of Bradley and Sheldon would go kersmash."

"Oh, no, it wouldn't." Susan's manner was positive to a degree. "After you'd thought it over for a few minutes you'd always come 'round to Roger's opinion."

"Do you really believe I haven't any more mind than that?" demanded Connie with a sudden, sharp seriousness that surprised her sister. "I shall have

to tell that to Uncle Duncan. Here he's been training me for five years, and now you don't see any difference."

Susan looked bewildered. She did not know what her sister meant by being trained by Uncle Duncan. From her point of view Connie had always been nearly perfect.

"I don't see what he could find to train," she remarked coldly. She hated not to understand, or to feel that anyone was making fun of her.

"You can't deny that you almost always give up your own way," she persisted. "Now Rose can get Roger to do anything she wants, and what's more he seems to like it. You know when he comes here he isn't in the house two minutes before he asks where Rose is."

"I know," answered Connie, in a dull, even tone that sounded queer to Susan, and made her screw around to look in her sister's face.

"What's the matter? Tired?" she asked solicitously. She felt guilty because she had been trying so hard to discourage Connie about the Lanes' garden. She must get her to thinking about something else so that she would forget that other. They were nearly at the house now and she must say something quickly.

"I think Roger is very fond of Rose, don't you?" she asked confidentially. "I believe he likes

her better even than Neil does, because he always seems fussed when he comes and finds Neil here."

"Everybody likes Rose," answered Connie, and Susan, cuddled against her tall sister, felt her take a deep breath and draw herself up to her full height.

"Yes, but I believe Roger does more than most folks," Susan said with a nod of emphasis. "I suppose I can't help thinking about weddings now that we've had two in the family." They were going up the steps now and Susan held Connie back for an instant. "Wouldn't it be queer if Rose should sometime be Rose Bradley? Why, she and Anne would be sisters and sister-in-laws—I mean sisters-in-law—at the same time, wouldn't they?"

"They certainly would," agreed Connie, in her most matter-of-fact way, and opened the door quickly.

Susan yearned to talk longer about this amazing possibility, but Connie went directly into the living-room to sit down beside Uncle Duncan and tell him about her walk. Susan saw on the hall table a letter from the friend who had left Melford, and deep in its perusal, forgot the affairs of her family.

It was a week after this when the girls, having been dismissed early, were walking home together,

that Frances Evans stopped and looked at the others in consternation.

"My goodness!" she said. "Mother told me two days ago to ask each one of you to invite a guest to the club meeting. It's a wonder I didn't forget it altogether."

"Anyone we please?" asked Peggy, and at Frances' affirmative nod, went on happily. "Mother's a member, so that gives me a chance to invite Miss Bond."

"Well, I'm sure I don't want to invite any of my teachers," Edith said with emphasis. "I should think you'd get enough of Miss Bond in school, Peg."

"Well, I don't and I'm very fond of her." Peggy was quite as firm in her manner as Edith.

"All right—all right. Ple-ease, don't take my head off. Susan, I know the one I'm going to choose—it's your sister Connie. My mother thinks she's the handsomest girl in Melford."

"Really?" Susan felt an elation it was hard to conceal. If this was what the Lanes were thinking, perhaps Connie's chances weren't so bad after all; though, of course, people didn't give you a chance to work for them just because you were good-looking.

"I always think of a big American Beauty rose when I see her," Edith went on sentimentally.

" She's so straight and tall, and she has such a lovely color in her cheeks and—and such a delicious laugh. Well, now, what's the matter with you? "

The question was addressed to Frances, who with her head on one side and a gleam in her eyes was regarding Edith with an amused smile.

" The very next time I meet an American Beauty rose I'm going to tell it the funniest thing I know," she remarked in an awestruck tone. " I never even saw one smile."

Edith, being in a good mood, laughed with the others at Fran's air of childlike innocence, and then neatly got back at her. " Of course there are all sorts of people in the world, and you can't help it, can you, Fran, if you haven't any imagination? " she said sweetly.

" That's one on you, Fran. And, now, children, make up; we are about to separate," said Susan. " You never can tell what may happen before we meet again."

By this time they had reached the corner where Peggy and Frances went east, Edith west and Susan straight ahead, and they halted automatically for a last word.

" I know a few things that are going to happen," said Edith. " Mother and I are going to motor to town to-morrow, and I'm to have some new clothes. Positively I haven't a decent rag to wear."

"Poor chee-ild! I suppose not," jeered Peggy. "All the same I'd like the first pickings of your closet, Edie, even when you're so poverty-stricken as you seem to be now. You should be the oldest of five the way I am; that would teach you something. Come on, Fran! We've got heaps to do on those note-books. See you Monday, girls, if not before."

Edith looked after them as they started down the street. "Regular digs, aren't they?" she remarked patronizingly. "I rather like them, though." And then, turning to Susan, "I wish you could——" she hesitated and laughed—that easy, mirthless laugh of hers which so often filled embarrassing pauses. "What was I going to say, anyway? Well, good-by. 'Phone me if there's anything to tell."

"Which means that she'll probably call me up to find out if I know anything," Susan told herself as she went on her way. She suspected that the interrupted sentence had started to say that Edith wished she could go with them to the city.

"I could have as well as not on Saturday," she thought mournfully. "Oh, dear, why does anyone keep grudges forever?"

As she walked along it occurred to her that she must remember to ask Motherje if she had any engagement for the afternoon of the club meeting.

Perhaps, having heard the trio performed once, and practised many times, she wouldn't be anxious to be invited this time.

It flitted through her mind that it would be interesting and decidedly unexpected to invite Derry's mother. In that way she could meet some of the Melford club women. They would be sure to like her; and Mrs. Marston must be lonely—Susan smiled at her own fancies and brushed the idea from her mind. Hadn't Motherje and Connie tried twice to call on her without success? Of course anyone who took such pains to keep away from people would not want to be invited. It would just make it more difficult for everyone.

She wondered idly as she walked along whom she should ask if Motherje did not wish to go. Suddenly the answer came to her, and she shrank from the idea, and, at the same time, desired to carry it out. A few minutes later she walked into her mother's sitting-room with her cheeks pink and her eyes shining.

"Oh, Motherje, I'm inviting you to go to the club meeting at Mrs. Evans' house, two weeks from to-day, to hear your talented daughter worry through her part in the trio, but"—Susan paused to take breath—"you don't really want to go, do you?"

"Under the circumstances I don't believe I do,"

laughed Motherje, "though I thank you for your urgent invitation."

"If I hadn't asked you that way should you? You know, darling dear, I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world." Susan sat down on the arm of the chair and laid her head against Mother's.

"I've promised to meet Rose in the city for a concert that afternoon. I didn't realize that was the day of your performance. Please make my excuses to Mrs. Evans and thank her for the invitation. Now, why didn't you want me to accept?"

"How could you guess it?" Susan left her unsteady position and pulled a chair in front of Motherje. "It's because I thought it would be a grand idea to ask Mrs. Lane to be my guest."

"Isn't Edith going to invite her mother?"

"She didn't mention her. She says she's going to ask Connie. And they think Connie looks like an American Beauty rose. Frances Evans made fun of her for saying that, but I thought she wasn't so far off after all, though I do say it who shouldn't. Of course I didn't mention my opinion, though."

Motherje looked pleased. "Connie does suggest that sometimes," she said with pride in her voice. In the bottom of her mind she was deciding that if one talked of roses Susan, herself, might be included. A pink rose, with gold faintly showing through delicate petals and ——

"Come back," urged Susan. "Your eyes are big, and you look as though you'd gone miles away."

"I was thinking about roses," Motherje explained meekly.

"I—I've got to tell you something," Susan began with an embarrassment quite unusual for her. "You know, Motherje, or rather you don't know, but you do now—I mean you will in a few minutes ——" she stopped with a deep sigh. "Now I'll try again. You see it isn't just because I want to invite Mrs. Lane that I—that I—want to invite her, but because I've never apologized to her for the time I slipped out of the automobile." Susan looked at her mother with some anxiety.

"Now, please, don't think it's because I haven't any standard about politeness," she went on hurriedly. "I've meant to and—meant to. I suppose you'll think I'm horrid."

"Susan, I didn't dream you'd remember our talk about standards all these weeks." Motherje was so gratified by this that she ignored for a moment the impoliteness Susan was confessing.

"Darling dear, your words sink deep even when I argue most," said Susan, waggling her head sadly. "Besides, the word has haunted me ever since. Daddy and Uncle Duncan often talk about business standards; Connie said something the other day

about art standards, and only yesterday I read about literary standards. It's been an awful bother—that word. Since you put it into my head I've never been able to forget it. And I could get along so comfortably without it." She sighed with such made-up pathos that her mother laughed.

"But, Susan—about Mrs. Lane—that was weeks ago, wasn't it? And now you've waited so long you can't make up your mind to do it, I suppose."

Susan felt an instant relief. Motherje was always such a comfort about understanding. "That's just it," she assented eagerly. "But I do believe that if I have something like this invitation to help me out I can put it through."

"I'd go this minute—before you have time to think about it," urged Motherje. "Please tell her I was sorry not to find her at home when I called."

"All right." Susan flung this back from the hall. She had taken the advice so promptly that she was almost at the door of her own room.

Two minutes later she was back hair-brush in hand. "I'm glad you gave me a message—that'll make it easier," she remarked with a worried air. "I'm wondering what I shall do if I see Edith first. She'll think it's ridiculous of me to be asking to see her mother."

"Darling, don't brush so hard. Perhaps you'll

have good luck and get in just as if you were a regular caller asking for Mrs. Lane. But, if you don't, you'll manage all right."

"I suppose so," Susan murmured doubtfully, and went back to her room again. She had forgotten Edith in making her plans, and she was beginning to feel rather like backing out. There were probably others whom she ought to invite if she could only think of them.

However, shining hair, a clean face and a becoming dress raised her spirits somewhat. It was really very nice inheriting Anne's dresses, because she was almost exactly the same size as Anne and she liked her sister's taste.

"Well, I'm off," she said, pausing by Motherje's door. "I hope there won't be the least excuse for me not to do it."

"You'll get along all right." Motherje's confidence was supreme and sustaining, but Susan shook her head.

"You may not be so proud of me when I get back," she hinted darkly. "I can see myself flying around almost any corner except Edith's."

She had gone half-way down-stairs when she turned and ran back again. "Don't you think we might have waffles for dessert to-night?" she inquired with such a gloomy face that her mother laughed in spite of herself.

"To celebrate your victory?"

"Or my defeat—kind of a consolation prize, you know. Whenever I feel low in my mind I yearn for waffles."

"That sounds like Jim—or Robert. It's time for them to be home, isn't it?"

"Oh, let me get out—let me get out—let me get——" Susan's voice was lost in her rapid flight down the stairs. Then the door slammed.

With motherly promptness Mrs. Sheldon put up the window and stuck out her head.

"Waffles for the winning lady," she called with heartening assurance. "Shall we serve peach marmalade or maple syrup with them?"

"Caramel sauce!" came back in decided tones, as the winning lady sped on her way.

CHAPTER XII

CREAM PUFFS AND CONVERSATION

In spite of the fact that November was half gone there was still green grass to be seen. This had been an unusually mild autumn; at the table, only this morning, Father had read of a man who had picked berries in his garden within a day or two.

There was something about the air and the blue sky and sunshine that made Susan wish she had winged sandals like—like—who was it Connie used to tell her about? Like Mercury, of course; he was the messenger for the gods and goddesses. It was a delightful idea, that of having wings on one's heels. Whoop! There you were, over a fence without half trying. And crossing streets in the city—what fun not to have to wait for traffic signals, but to sail neatly over at a safe height.

She had started in the direction which she took each morning in going to school, really the shortest way to Edith's house, but it occurred to her that if she kept on she was almost sure to meet Jim and Brucey. In her present state of mind that would be dangerous. They would, perhaps, talk

her into telling what she was going to do, and she might be weak enough to give up her purpose.

At once she decided to cut through Harley Snow's back yard, across the alley and through the Pecks' yard. Then, after a little, she would be in the wooded fields which led by a wandering path to the part of the town where Edith lived. It would be almost twice as long a way to go, but it would give her time to think over what she was going to say, and there would be small chance of meeting the boys.

She had forgotten the possibility of other interruption as she skimmed along the walk at the side of Harley's house, and it was a disconcerting surprise to find that small boy, himself, and Jiggy Grant in the back yard. They were dressed in Indian costumes, and a realistic war-whoop greeted Susan's arrival.

"Oh-oo! You've come to play with us!" shrieked Jiggy, falling upon the newcomer with joyful affection.

Harley's little crutch brought him to Susan's side in a hurry, eyes shining. "Goody! You always make up such nice games!" He looked up at her shyly. He would have liked to hug her, too, but Jiggy seemed to have the right of way. Besides big boys didn't do those things.

"Oh, Jiggy, you'll spoil your feathers if you

squeeze me so hard. Who are you? Pocahontas? I can't stop a minute. I'm in a hurry."

Even as she spoke she was noting Harley's disappointed face, and, as usual, the pathetic crutch made her soft-hearted. Perhaps she ought to stay awhile, now that she had dropped into the middle of their game. Wasn't she always being told that she should think of others before herself? Well, here was a chance even if she did have to put off ——

"You'd like to give it up—you know you would," she told herself severely. Then she detached the clinging Jiggy, and slipped past her toward the back gate. "Sorry, Harley. I'll come some other time. No, no, Jiggy, you must not go with me." Susan, half-way across the alley, turned to wave an imperative hand at Jiggy who kept straight on.

"No! No!" Susan stamped her foot and looked sternly at the offender. "I can't have you running after me."

The imitative Jiggy stamped her foot and scowled fiercely. "Nindians has to; they has to trail after folks. I yam—I yam Pokey—Pokey what you said."

For an instant Susan almost yielded. Jiggy was the one neighborhood child whom she found it hard to manage. She hated to have a scene with her and make her cry—or, perhaps, have to carry her

by main force to her mother who would probably not be at home. She did wish mothers would bring up their children to mind.

"Now look here, Jiggy," she said, walking back a few steps, "some day soon I'll play with you and Harley, but to-day I can't. And if you try to follow me I shan't do anything with you for a long, long, long time."

"That sounds like a m-million years," quavered Harley who had hopped along to Jiggy's side. "I wish you wouldn't say so many 'longs.'"

"You're all right, Harley. I'll take you over to my house some day, but not Jiggy," answered Susan inflexibly.

"Aw, come on, Jig. I'll ask Katie for a cookie. She's made new ones to-day, and they smell awful good."

Jiggy stood without moving, a sturdy figure, with the gay fringes of her costume fluttering in the breeze; her thoughtful gaze was fixed upon Susan who was slowly backing through the gateway into the alley. "All right; c'mon," she said grudgingly, and turned abruptly toward the house with Harley swinging after her.

Susan longed to hook the gate of the Pecks' yard, but didn't quite dare; it might make it inconvenient for someone. Anyway, cookies would beguile Jiggy until she herself could be well out of the way.

In the relief of having escaped, and of having put behind her the temptation to give up her call on Mrs. Lane, she felt almost light-hearted.

It would have lessened her contentment, however, if she had seen a small Indian entering by the Pecks' back gate just as she left the yard at the front; waiting to cross the street until Susan had turned a corner; stealthily rounding the same corner and slinking behind a tree; speeding softly from one tree to another, and quite forgetting the tall feathers of the head-dress when a head was poked out to see if Susan were looking back.

Susan walked on at a comfortable pace, sure that she was beyond pursuit by Jiggy, and perfectly oblivious to the possibility of eating cookies as one ran. By this time spaces between the houses were widening, and she could see, not far ahead, the cottages which were the last before reaching the wooded field.

Something, perhaps the sight of children playing near the last of these cottages, made her think again of Jiggy, and she turned involuntarily to look behind her. As she did so she caught a flash of red and yellow dodging behind a tree some distance back, and a minute later an investigating head was pushed out.

"The little monkey!" groaned Susan, wheeling sharply in a pretense of having seen nothing.

"Now I suppose I've got to go way back and actually put her into her mother's hands. Just when I've got my courage up—and I may never try it again if I don't go on now."

It was exasperating. Susan's feet stepped on unconsciously while she thought about it. Of course there was nothing to do but go back, and after that there wouldn't be time to go to Edith's house. She could see herself dragging a shrieking, struggling child over the way they had come; Jiggy never gave up a cherished idea without tumult.

All at once the refuge of the wooded path seemed near and inviting. It was a path of such curves and angles that, once on it, she could be out of sight and hearing in a moment. Jiggy would not dare to follow if she couldn't see anyone ahead, and, of course, she knew the way home. Anyway, she wasn't responsible for Jiggy. Without stopping to think longer she ran as fast as her feet could carry her.

After the first turn she dropped into a walk, stepping springily over the slippery carpet of pine needles. Fifteen minutes of progress like this should bring her to the opening where she could turn into the street on which the Lanes lived. After all, it wasn't very pleasant going this way; the pines and hemlocks seemed to shut her in, and other trees, stripped of their leaves, had a gaunt and

uninviting air. She wished she had gone the shorter way even at the risk of meeting Jim and Robert Bruce. Then, too, she would have avoided the children, and, somehow, Jiggy was heavily on her mind.

She was just wondering whether Father would say that she'd better not go this way alone, when she distinctly heard someone coming from around the next bend in the path. In the first moment she half turned, planning to walk quickly back to a path that led out; in the next she had decided to go on. And then, to her exceeding annoyance, she heard Brucey's voice, and Derry Marston answering him.

Susan assumed what she fondly hoped was an expression of complete indifference and walked on with her head held high. The next instant Brucey was greeting her with surprise.

"Hello! Where are you bound all by your lonesome?"

"Oh, just a little farther," Susan answered indefinitely. "Where are you and Derry going?" She was pleased with herself for saying that just as if she had always known the Marston boy.

"Home, of course. Say, why do you go this way? Does Cousin Jean know you're out without Jim or me or—or Rex?"

"She knows I'm out; she saw me go," laughed

Susan, keeping her temper beautifully. She was edging by the boys now and she started along the path again. "I'll see you at dinner-time," she said, with a wave of the hand which seemed to indicate that she had quite finished with them.

"Look here," persisted Robert Bruce, following in her wake. "Haven't I told you before that you shouldn't be going through these woods alone? There's a bunch of gypsies just breaking camp a little farther along here. Let us go with you until you get out on the street again. I suppose you're going to see the Edith girl, aren't you?"

Brucey was such a good guesser and so exasperatingly sure about everything! Susan turned on him decidedly.

"What difference does it make to you if I am? You have terribly old-fashioned ideas about girls. Besides, the gypsies are some distance from this path. They've camped here for three or four summers, and I know some of the women to speak to."

"Well, anyway, someone told us that they're feeling pretty bad-tempered just now," persisted Brucey. "They were told they must get away from here before a certain date, and because it's been so warm they've stayed overtime. And now they've been warned to get out before midnight. You'd better let us go along."

"How foolish!" snapped Susan. "No, you can't go with me. I don't need anyone."

"Whew! Now I guess I'm put in my place." Robert Bruce was irritatingly good-natured. "Come on, Marston. I've decided I'd like to go home this other way. The path's free, I suppose."

Without comment Susan resumed her interrupted walk. Though she did not look around she was quite aware that the boys were only a little way behind her. "Just as if I had to have a guard," she told herself impatiently. "That Marston boy never says a word when I'm around; it makes him seem stupid." She tried hard to get up a proper resentment over it all, but could only succeed in feeling rather foolish.

She gazed with interest at the gypsy camp when she got near it, and could see for herself that there was more than usual going on. Wagons were being loaded, tents taken down; it was evident that they were breaking camp in a hurry. She had seen Gypsy Ann, the woman who often came to the house with baskets, only yesterday, and she had said nothing about going away; had only showed her white teeth in a wide smile when Connie gave her a glass of grape jelly.

"I should hate to get her cross with me. She looks as strong as—as anything. But then these gypsies would never do any harm in Melford." In

spite of this statement of faith, Susan found herself wishing that they were leaving pleasantly, instead of being warned to go before a certain hour.

She walked on briskly, paying no attention to her self-appointed escort. Edith's house began to seem near now and she tried to plan what she should say to Mrs. Lane. She was so absorbed in this that when she finally turned into the street where Edith lived she had forgotten about the boys, and was only dimly conscious that Brucey's clear whistle was piping—"Come Back My Bonnie to Me, to Me."

It seemed a bit of good luck that Edith didn't see her coming and fly out with a rapturous greeting, but when she asked to see Mrs. Lane, the maid looked surprised and a little doubtful.

"Just step in, please, and I'll see," she answered, and left Susan in the formal-looking reception room which gave her a foreboding chill and made her want to run away. It was a beautiful room, she was glad she knew enough to realize that, but her mind turned with relief to the warmth and light and cordiality which greeted the guest in her own home.

"Mrs. Lane says will you please come into the living-room," the maid said, coming back so noiselessly that Susan jumped.

In the living-room, where a glowing fire helped

to dispel the late afternoon shadows, it seemed more cheerful, and Susan's courage rose a little only to go down again the next moment.

Mrs. Lane did not come to meet her, but stretched a languid hand from the big chair which almost concealed her. "Well, Susan, did you really want to see me or was Abbie mistaken?" she asked in a tired voice which made Susan feel that she was scarcely welcome.

"I really wanted to see you." Susan walked across the room, hoping that she seemed more buoyant than she felt. She had not counted on finding a Mrs. Lane who would speak in a pathetic voice and look up at her with sorrowful dark eyes.

"I—I'm afraid you're not feeling well enough to see me," she ventured, looking down at her hostess, and wondering how anyone could look so limp and forlorn. "Wouldn't you like to have me go right away again?" In the bottom of her mind she hoped fervently that this languid, pale lady, with whom she felt not at all acquainted, would send her away; she could almost feel her quick, eager escape.

"Oh, no; I don't mind having you," Mrs. Lane remarked with doubtful hospitality. "Do sit down in that chair and tell me how you happened to come."

Susan meekly sat down as directed and tried to

think what to say first. Then it all came with a rush.

"Mrs. Lane, I've always been meaning to apologize for getting out of the automobile when—when you were going to give me such a good time. But really I had to go to school, and—and I couldn't have had a good time, you know, because ——" she paused on the brink of saying something she had meant to keep back.

"Dear me! What a long apology about nothing at all." Mrs. Lane's weary indifference seemed to take the importance out of everything in the world. "I must say, though, I can't understand why you shouldn't have had a good time. Nor why you didn't want to stay out of school when your mother was willing to let you. It doesn't seem natural."

Susan wavered between two courses. It happened so long ago that perhaps Mrs. Lane wouldn't mind now because Edith had not done as she was told. But, after all, Edie had trusted her not to tell ——

Suddenly, the memory of the inviting charm of that long-gone morning swept her mind clear of doubt; she could almost hear her father's voice saying that he was glad his children had grit enough to stick to what they knew they ought to do.

The next moment she found herself speaking with assurance. "You see I shouldn't have had a

SUSAN SAT DOWN AS DIRECTED AND TRIED TO THINK WHAT TO SAY FIRST

good time because I knew I ought to stick to work that morning. Father and I had agreed about that just before I met—just before Edith asked me. But I *do* apologize because I might have made it plainer to you, perhaps, why I had to go back." With this off her mind the burden of weeks slipped from Susan.

"And now may I tell you what else I came for?" she went on hastily. "You know that Edith and Frances and I are going to play our trio at the club meeting at Mrs. Evans' house. Will you be my guest? If you can stand hearing us play it?"

"Why, you sweet thing," said Mrs. Lane, sitting up suddenly. "Do you really want me? Wouldn't you rather invite someone your own age?" She had lost her languid indifference, and the sharpness had gone from her expression. There was almost a childlike eagerness in her manner and glance.

"Of course, I want you. I was only afraid you might not want to come. I'm not sure whether you've met many of the ladies of that club, but ——"

"They know such a lot, don't they?" interrupted Mrs. Lane, still with the same childlike manner. "Someone told me they write wonderful stories and poems and read them to each other. I shan't dare to open my mouth."

"Neither shall I," laughed Susan. "We'll

keep still together and tell each other afterwards what we think of their stories and poems. I couldn't write one to save my life."

"Oh, you! You probably could. Your father and mother write such wonderful travel books. And your sister has had stories in the magazines, hasn't she?"

"Anne? Oh, yes. She was going to have writing for a career, you know, but then she married Archie. And now there's Archie Jr. I'd rather take care of him than write, any day."

"Edith says you're so nice with children, and that they're all crazy about you." Mrs. Lane was on her feet now and ringing a bell. Then she went across the big room to meet the maid who would answer.

Susan, left to herself for a moment, thought of Jiggy Grant who probably was not loving her very much just now, and promised herself to make it up to the child in some way.

Soft lights sprang up around the room, and the maid pulled down the shades before she went away.

Mrs. Lane coming back into the firelight, a little flushed now, and more than ever a new Mrs. Lane to her guest, smiled happily at Susan. "I forgot to tell you that Edith has gone into town in the car to meet her father, so we'll have a party all by ourselves."

"Oh, I'm afraid ——" Susan began vaguely, but her hostess broke in.

"Please don't say you must go home. It isn't dark yet, but it's nicer to have the lights, isn't it? I planned to have fresh cream puffs for tea and then I was too lonesome to eat them by myself. I wish your mother was here, too; only I'm a little afraid of her because she knows so much."

"Oh, but you'd never know it," protested Susan. "I mean she doesn't show it—oh, goodness, what do I mean? Anyway, she told me to say she was sorry to miss you when she called."

"Did she really? I—I thought she'd be rather glad." Mrs. Lane's eyes held a challenge; they were anxious and yet a bit defiant, too. It was as if she were saying in her mind, "You know you can't deny that she might be glad, but please—if you possibly can."

"Mother wouldn't have said it if she hadn't meant it," Susan affirmed positively. "She hasn't much time to make calls, but ——"

"She spends a great deal of time with you and your brother, doesn't she?" interrupted Mrs. Lane. "And you like that, don't you?" There was a wistful unbelief in her voice which made Susan remember that Edith and her mother did not seem to be the best of comrades.

"We love it. We ——" the entrance of the

maid with the tray made Susan pause. After all, she was glad she had not gone any farther in telling how much Motherje meant to her and Jim. It would seem almost like boasting, she was afraid. And Susan hated the sound of that word.

The cream puffs were delicious; brown and tender and so oozy that Mrs. Lane and Susan chattered like children over the perils involved in eating them.

"They're not good afternoon tea-ers, are they?" said Mrs. Lane who had laughed as whole-heartedly as Susan. "These are made by a recipe my mother gave me. I can remember how good they used to taste to us children." Her eyes grew soft and she was silent for a moment. "This afternoon I was so homesick," she went on with a catch in her breath. "I just longed for something that would seem like old times. It's lucky for me you came, and not a ceremonious caller."

"Lucky for me, too; I wouldn't have missed these for anything." Susan sipped her tea which was really hot water with slices of lemon and sugar added. She had asked to have it this way.

"Edith would think she was insulted if she were offered so tea-less a cup as that," said Edith's mother, who by this time did not seem to Susan like anyone's mother, but just a girl like herself.

"Jim and I don't drink tea and coffee. Father

asked us not to until we are older. It isn't any hardship for me, because I don't like tea."

"Fancy your child not doing what you don't want her to do," murmured Mrs. Lane with a whimsical lift of her eyebrows. And then quickly, as if she regretted having said that, "Do tell me about some of the good times you have at home."

Susan seldom had an invitation like this, with so appreciative a listener and no one to interrupt her, and she did her best to be entertaining.

"You've made me feel years younger." Mrs. Lane was still smiling over Susan's last story. "Have another cream puff. I've kept you talking."

Susan put out her hand then drew it back again.

"Don't you want one?"

"Yes, but I've just remembered that I specially asked Mother to have waffles for dessert, and—and I'm afraid I shan't have an inch of room for them."

Susan looked like a perplexed cherub, and Mrs. Lane laughed. "Don't eat it then," she said with quick decision.

This was so surprising that Susan could scarcely believe her own ears; she had expected to be told that young persons could eat anything—or that one was young but once and must not lose any enjoyment. She could think of several things that older persons were likely to say under such circumstances.

After all, there was the walk home—the exercise would give her an appetite. Half-unconsciously her hand went out again toward the cream puff.

"I wouldn't have you refuse those waffles for anything," Mrs. Lane said decidedly. "Do you have a long table and do you all tell stories and laugh and chatter while you're eating?"

"A large, round one, and we all love meal-times." Susan had forgotten the cream puff, and her eyes were on the clock which was just beginning to strike. "I mean—of course everyone likes to eat—but we all like being together and talking. Goodness! That clock struck five, didn't it? The time has gone like a minute. I must fly—only wish I could."

"I was so certain the car would come—I'll have it go right along and pick you up when it does get here." She was not trying to make her wait as Susan had dreaded. "You're sure you don't mind going alone—I'm afraid it's getting dark—I'll send Abbie with you."

"Oh, no, please don't," begged Susan, hurrying into her coat. "I shall be there in no time. I'd wait only, you see, I specially asked ——"

"I know," Mrs. Lane interrupted. There was a soft brightness about her, but Susan fancied her eyes looked a little sorry. "I'd hate to have you not there—I can just see you all around the table

having such a good time. That was the way it used to be at my old home." She tried to help in buttoning Susan's coat; then stooped and kissed her cheek.

"I'm so glad you came; you've done me a world of good. Thank you for inviting me to be your guest; I accept with pleasure. And now do hurry. I'd no idea it was so late until the clock struck."

In her solicitude Mrs. Lane went to the door with her guest, and they were quiet a moment to listen for the sound of the motor. The sun had gone down, but there was still a glowing sky, and Susan was glad of the chance to run swiftly through the crisp air.

"Don't mind because I'm going home alone," she said quickly. "I love it." And then remembering to be polite, "I've had such a nice time; and I'm so glad you'll be my guest. Come and see Mother soon, won't you? Good-by."

As she skimmed down the driveway she looked back and could see Mrs. Lane still watching her from the porch.

"She really seems to like me," mused Susan, turning a short corner and trotting along the sidewalk at a brisk pace. "She was just plain lonesome this afternoon; I suppose anyone she didn't positively dislike would have done just as well." In spite of which broad-minded view of the situa-

tion, Susan felt a certain elation, an unusual sense of virtue.

"There's no knowing what I've accomplished for Connie this afternoon," she told herself proudly. "And I've had a good time, too. No one could have made me believe I should ever like Edith's mother so much.

"That was better luck than I had with the Marston boy's mother." Her thoughts leaped to the bungalow and the two who lived there. She had about decided that she should never actually know whether what Edith had intimated about the boy's father was true or not.

"Jim and Brucey are devoted to him," she was thinking, "but Uncle Duncan and I don't get anywhere with our secret pact."

By this time Susan had reached the centre of the town and could not give herself over to meditation in so whole-hearted a fashion. There were streets to cross, and people she knew were continually passing her with a greeting.

When she first turned into her own street it appeared deserted, but a moment of rapid walking brought her within sight of a group of persons in front of Jiggy Grant's house.

Susan stopped involuntarily and peered through the dusk to find out who composed the group. Finally it resolved itself into the mothers of Jiggy

and Harley and two other neighbor-women. There was a confused murmur of voices, and someone was crying.

CHAPTER XIII

JIGGY GETS LOST

Susan stood still, and a cloud of discomfort enveloped her. She had been feeling so triumphant, so entirely the winning lady, as Motherje had called her, that this instant conviction of something wrong, something that concerned her, was hard to bear.

She was just wondering whether she could slip home another way when Mrs. Grant's voice, lifted above the others, told her at once what had happened.

"Oh! Oh!" she wailed. "My little Geraldine! Lost! I saw her follow Susan Sheldon. Susan ought to have sent her back. Oh! Oh! Oh!"

On the last three words her voice went up the scale in a way that was horrifying to Susan. And to speak of Jiggy as Geraldine made her seem lost beyond recall. Again there was a confused murmur of voices trying to comfort Mrs. Grant, and the other women surrounded her closely.

Instinctively Susan stepped quietly backward. It wasn't fair to blame her for this. She was not responsible for the neighborhood children, and if

Mrs. Grant had seen Jiggy follow her, she must also have seen that she, Susan, was trying with all her might to make the child go back. And, anyway, she had supposed for a long time that Jiggy was safely eating cookies with Harley. It was abso-lute-ly unfair to blame her, Susan decided definitely.

"Oh! Oh!" began Jiggy's mother again, in such sharp tones that Susan quickened her backward progress with a jerk, and at the third shrill "oh!" came unexpectedly in contact with someone approaching from the direction in which she herself had recently come.

"Excuse me," she murmured mechanically, so absorbed in the problem of Jiggy that nothing else mattered.

"That's all right. I didn't know you were going to speed up so suddenly," responded a boy's voice, which Susan recognized instantly as belonging to Derry Marston.

"You haven't got Jim or—or even Brucey concealed about you, have you?" she asked, with an anxious note in her voice in spite of her effort to speak as usual. "They're never 'round when I want them."

"I haven't seen either of them since about four o'clock. Won't I do?"

"I don't know," Susan answered drearily.

"I'm in a dreadful muddle." She peered through the dusk and could make out figures mounting the steps of Jiggy's house. As the light from the hall fell upon them she saw that two of the other women had their arms about Mrs. Grant.

"They're getting her into the house—I'm thankful," she murmured. "That's Jiggy Grant's mother," she explained, turning to the Marston boy. "She's having hysterics because Jiggy's lost—she always has 'em. And she always thinks someone's to blame—this time I'm it."

"Are you really? Or does she only think so?"

"Well—partly I am. It's not fair, though," Susan reasserted stubbornly. "People should take a little care of their own children, don't you think?" And then, without waiting for an answer, "When I met you and Brucey this afternoon I'd just been running away from Jiggy. I didn't dream she'd follow me after I got out of sight."

"Is she the one you tempted with ice-cream cones when she was on the ladder? I don't believe she'd give up anything easily."

"Neither do I—now. Well, there's only one thing for me to do, I suppose, and that's to find her." Susan, who happened to be standing near the entrance of Harley Snow's back yard, started suddenly to retrace her path of earlier in the afternoon.

To Derry, left without explanation, it was somewhat mystifying to have her disappear from sight. Nevertheless, he managed to catch up with her just as she was opening the Snows' back gate.

"Let me hunt her, and you go home and send the boys out," he offered, as he kept the gate from shutting between them.

"Oh, everyone in the block will know it soon—and I'm the one who let her get lost." They were at the Pecks' back gate now, and, in another moment, speeding through their back yard. "Anyway, two of us are enough to go in this direction." She accepted him without demur as a member of her expedition and hurried on swiftly.

Running was one of Susan's accomplishments, and it was no small effort to keep up with her as the boy soon found out. Altogether this was an enlightening experience for him; he had never supposed that girls so promptly took the responsibility for what they had done.

"I saw her peep out from behind a tree just about here," Susan said, when they had turned into the street that led to the woodland. "And right away after that I ran away from her." The streetlamps were infrequent now, but she did not slacken her pace. "We can't slow up yet, because when we get to that path in the woods we shall just have to feel our way and call."

"I've got my electric torch," said Derry pulling it from his pocket. "When I go for the late errands I take it. It's dark round our house and this is better than nothing."

"I should say so. I'm glad I met you; I should hate to have to do this alone," Susan answered impulsively, and then hastened to say in half contradiction, "That is—of course I'm not afraid. Jim and I have played around in this woodland ever since I can remember. It—it usually seems a very friendly place to me." It occurred to her, after she began the last sentence, that this afternoon it had not seemed wholly friendly.

A few moments later they were passing the small houses, the last before reaching the woodland. There were six, rather widely separated, and set somewhat back from the street. The lights from some of them illuminated small patches of the road and left dark shadows between.

"She might be in one of these," suggested Derry. "There's a woman at the door of the first one. I'll ask her."

Susan waited impatiently in the road. It was no use to inquire, she felt sure, and Derry's return confirmed this belief.

"She says she noticed you, and that pretty soon Jiggy went by, and she watched her until she turned into the wood-path. The woman felt sure Jiggy

must be following you, because she was running and calling."

"Did she see her come back?" Susan demanded briefly.

"No. She said she looked out every few minutes for awhile, and then she decided Jiggy must have caught up with you."

"Then it's only wasted time to ask at these other houses." Susan set off again fleetly in spite of the black shadows and the increasing darkness.

Once on the wood-path she went slowly, stopping every few minutes. "Jigg-ee! Jiggy! It's Susan," she called. "Jiggy! It's Susan come to take you home." She listened with painful intentness, half-expecting, wholly hoping to hear Jiggy's small, querulous voice lifted in answer. She stopped Derry if he tried to talk, for fear she might fail to catch some faint sound.

They moved along for some distance in this way, Derry picking out the path with his torch, and Susan calling, because she thought Jiggy would be afraid of a strange voice.

In the intervals between the calls a silence fell about them; a silence so threatening and oppressive that, in spite of her aching throat, Susan felt obliged to begin calling again almost as soon as she had stopped.

Finally she halted. "I don't believe she's here,"

she said hoarsely. "I simply can't feel that anyone's in the woods except us.

"I'm just finding out what a goose I've been," she went on. "Why didn't you tell me how foolish it was to come here without lanterns? We might have known that two of us couldn't find her. Anyway, the whole thing is Brucey's fault; if he had kept on home the way he was going when you both met me this afternoon he would have seen Jiggy and coaxed her to go back with him."

It was an unexpected attack, and Susan was so apparently in earnest, that, for an instant, Derry didn't know what to say.

Then, in spite of the seriousness of not finding Jiggy, he laughed.

"You *are* funny," he chuckled. "I must tell Mother that. You didn't give me much chance to object to coming here, I'll say. But I'll second the motion that we blame it all on Bruce—losing Jiggy and all." He went off into another burst of laughter which for some reason ended surprisingly on a flat, dispirited note.

"You make me feel silly. You ought to know I didn't mean what I said." It was the old Susan who could not bear to be made fun of.

And then Derry Marston blurted out the question that had tempered the close of his laughter. "Do you suppose Jiggy could have gone farther

than this?" he asked anxiously. "As far—as far as the gypsy camp?"

"She never would," Susan affirmed, all petulance gone from her voice and fear settling in her heart. "She would have been afraid—would have turned back long before—oh, do you suppose they've started?"

"I heard a man in the post-office say the last wagon left about an hour ago."

"They never would have taken a child from Melford—it's foolish to think so—everybody knows them here." In spite of her protests, Susan had turned her face toward home and was walking as fast as she could along the dark path.

Derry slipped by and walked in front of her, making a glimmer of light on the path with his torch. He did not know what to say, and decided that silence was the best thing until they should reach the open road.

"Do let's hurry," Susan said after awhile breathlessly. "I must tell them all I know about it. I ought to have done that in the first place." She went on as fast as she could, stumbling and sliding on the unfriendly path which seemed to be trying to hold her back.

She was so meek, so different from the girl of a few minutes back, that Derry felt sorry for her. "I can't see that you need to blame yourself," he

said with an attempt at consolation. "You're not supposed to take care of the neighborhood children."

Awhile before Susan, herself, had said almost exactly this, but now her mind was so filled with the picture of Jiggy, alone, frightened, crying, even hurt, perhaps, that she was ready to take the blame.

"It—it's a great deal my fault," she said, not slackening her pace. "I might have known Jiggy would never give up. She's just like me when I was a child. If I was ever told not to do anything, that was the thing I most wanted to do. Oh, I should have taken Jiggy back, even if—even if I had to tie her."

The last few words came out with an energy that reassured Derry. He preferred the assertive, unexpected Susan. "Isn't this the path that leads out?" he said a few minutes later.

"Thank goodness! Yes." Susan gave a sigh of relief. "As soon as we get out on the road we can really hurry. I'm not going to stop for anything."

The street leading by the small houses seemed almost as light as day compared to the darkness of the wooded path, but it was still a place of deep shadows and splashes of light. Just before they reached it, one of these lighted spaces was broad-

ened and intensified by the opening of the door of the house nearest the woodland.

In spite of her declaration that nothing should stop her, Susan halted instinctively and drew back into deeper shadow.

Out of the house came a laughing, chattering group of children, dancing about a taller person who was carrying another child. The light from behind them outlined the figures sharply, and the voices came distinctly through the clear air to the watchers in the shadow.

"Come again; come again, Pokey, and we'll play with you."

"Ma! She's lettin' that bread and 'lasses drip all over the genelman."

"I shouldn't 'ave given it to 'er. Let me 'ave it, Lovey, and I'll get you a cake." This last was a soft, mother voice and carried in spite of its softness.

"No-oo! I want it—I don't have 'lasses at my house—neither does Harley." The voice was peremptory—unmistakable.

Susan gasped and clutched Derry Marston's arm. "It's Jiggy! Who's carrying her?"

As if in answer to her question, an equally unmistakable voice proclaimed identity.

"Let her keep it," the voice remarked resignedly. "I think about all there is to drip has

run down my collar already. Anyway, I like her better pleasant."

"That's Bruce, all right," chuckled Derry. "Let's hurry and meet him when he hits the road."

"Wait," muttered Susan. "I don't want him to see me."

She was stepping softly backward again, and there was nothing for Derry to do but to follow. To him this stealthy retreat was unexplainable, and it flashed into his mind that she was still somewhat like Jiggy in her methods.

"Sh!" warned Susan, as if he were making all the noise. "Listen!"

"You'll tell them, won't you," the soft mother voice went on, "that we're only lately 'ere and didn't know 'er. And all she would say as to 'er name was 'Pokey.'"

"That's my fault, too; I called her Pocahontas," whispered Susan, then listened again.

"She was so tired when she first came that she dropped right off to sleep," the woman continued. "She 'ad a long nap, but she woke as frisky as a kitten all ready for a bit of a frolic with the children. I couldn't leave my 'ouse very well, and I was 'oping my 'usband would get 'ome, and take 'er back to 'er mother, poor soul."

"I'll explain it to them," promised Robert Bruce. "Now then, kiddie, we'll go. Don't be

partial—just tip that bread so I'll get the rest of the 'lasses down the other side of my neck."

"Good-by! Good-by! I'm coming again," chanted Jiggy, as she was borne down the walk to the street with the children leaping about her. "Goo-ood-by. I'll come again and bwing Harley."

A chorus of farewells filled the air as Robert Bruce started at a brisk pace along the road, and involuntarily Derry Marston took a step in pursuit of him.

"Oh, please, don't let Brucey know we're here," Susan besought him. "As soon as he gets around the first corner I'll show you a short cut home. I want to get there before he does.

"Wouldn't you know he'd be the one to find that child?" she went on while they waited. "And here I was feeling so unhappy because I thought she was alone in the dark somewhere—or that the gypsies—I told you those gypsies wouldn't touch a Melford child, didn't I?" she ended triumphantly.

"Yes. But I don't see why you have it in for Robert because he found her."

"Why, because *I* wanted to find her—having lost her," explained Susan with the air of being astonished by his density. "Besides he'll be more stuck-up than ever."

"Naturally—with the 'lasses—but I don't think

Brucey is the least bit ——" Derry got no farther, for Susan had started off at a breath-taking pace. It was all he could do to keep up with the twists and turns which led them in an unbelievably short time into the Sheldon back yard.

After the darkness and anxiety it seemed to Susan a most safe and delightful thing to be standing in her own yard, looking into the brightly lighted kitchen where Tillie was moving about. And with this pleasant security came a sudden realization of how she should have felt if Jiggy had not been found.

She drew in her breath sharply. "Oh, my! Just suppose ——" she began, and then stopped. What was the use of getting excited over something that hadn't happened and probably never would happen? Jiggy shouldn't get ahead of her again in this way ——

"Is your clock right?" Derry interrupted her thoughts by snapping on his torch to look at his watch. "Six-fifteen! I must hurry home."

"Oh, do you think your mother will be frightened? Of course she might—all alone there and expecting you long ago."

"She isn't at home; if she had been I'm afraid I couldn't have gone with you without letting her know. In which case I shouldn't have been much use, should I?" Derry chuckled softly over the

remembrance of Susan's lightning dashes. "I must hurry home now and meet her later at the car."

"Why go home?" objected Susan. "Come in for dinner with us." She heard herself saying this, but she could scarcely believe she was really inviting the Marston boy to dinner. However, this had been an afternoon of surprises. Anything might happen.

"That will save you quite a walk," she went on before he could answer, "and we'll all be glad to have you. The boys will be awfully glad—they like you so much and they've been talking about wanting you to meet Mother and Father, and you already know Uncle Duncan." Susan was quite pleased with herself; she felt sure none of the others could have done this better.

In the light from the kitchen window Derry looked half-dazzled by the prospect of cheerful companionship, very much as if he should like to accept, but still somewhat unyielding. "I—I think ——" he began.

"Don't think! It's a bad habit," interrupted Susan. "Come on in. I'll take you through the kitchen like one of the family." She was her imperious self again and expected no denial.

Derry followed half-unwillingly, and yet by some strange contradiction, gladly, up the steps and into

the kitchen. It was warm, brightly-lighted; there were odors, deliciously savory. If he went home he should have to eat alone and get the meal himself.

"Tillie, Derry Marston is going to have dinner with us," Susan explained promptly. "I must find Jim."

"Jim, he's out hunting for that Jiggy Grant," said Tillie, giving Derry, who had been through her kitchen before, a welcoming nod. "I'm holding dinner back."

"That's all the better for us," declared Susan. "Come on, Derry; we'll find Uncle Duncan. He'll take care of you."

In the hall where Derry was taking off his coat, Susan lowered her voice confidentially. "Please don't breathe a word to Brucey or—or anyone about our trying to find Jiggy, unless you hear me say something about it. I'm almost sure I'm going to get a rise out of Brucey in some way, but I don't know just how yet."

"All right," agreed Derry, without in the least understanding Susan's motives or methods. Why should she want to get a rise out of Bruce? He'd certainly had the worst of it with all that molasses dripping down his collar. But it was her affair and she could do as she liked about it. Anyway, he was glad he was to be left to the tender mercies

of Mr. Duncan Graham, whom he had already met and liked.

Susan waited long enough to see her guest safely ensconced in front of the living-room fire with Uncle Duncan, and then went to interview her mother. Awhile afterwards she heard the boys come up-stairs and realized that Derry was with them, and this put her mind quite at rest about him.

Emerging from her own room ten minutes later she was confronted by Jim and Brucey. She looked around and behind them expectantly. "He—he—you haven't let him escape!" she demanded with real feeling.

Jim stabbed the air downward with a pointing forefinger. "We couldn't keep him—he's fascinated by Uncle Duncan," he explained in a whisper. And then, "How under the sun did you manage it? Did you do it all by your lonesome?"

Susan nodded. "I—I just invited him," she said carelessly, as if this were a mere trifle compared to what she could do.

Robert Bruce spoke in a husky murmur. "You're a wizard, I'll say. I'm registering surprise and respectful admiration. Could you tell it by my face?"

"No. To me you look—well, you look plain hungry. And I do wish you wouldn't slick your hair down so tight. Come on; I'll beat you down."

"We took Derry up-stairs with us," Jim said, as they all went into the living-room together, "but he was so anxious to get back to Uncle Duncan we had to let him go again."

"He was telling me something so mighty interesting ——" Derry began eagerly, but stopped because Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon came into the room. Then Rose and Connie arrived almost at the same moment, and they all went out to dinner.

Susan wondered if the old, shy silence would envelop Derry again, but somehow things didn't go as she anticipated. For the time being, at least, Derry turned into a nice friendly boy who said little, but seemed to enjoy this unexpected good time with all his heart.

Another thing Susan had waited for didn't happen. She had thought that Brucey and Jim would talk about Jiggy, but not a word was said. There were chances, too, but the boys did not take advantage of them.

Once she, herself, had been on the point of asking Brucey if he liked "'lasses," but someone else spoke, and she forgot about it. There was always so much to be interested in when the family was together. To-night Father was chuckling over a letter from Ellis which he promised to read aloud after dinner. Anne had sent Rose some new snapshots of Archie Junior, and Susan could hardly

wait to see them. Connie was interested in talking about a prize competition just now started in one of the garden magazines. Altogether it was a typical Sheldon dinner-hour, with plenty of fun and laughter interspersed.

After dinner, in the living-room, Derry sat as close as possible to Uncle Duncan, and in a sort of responsive silence kept on enjoying everything. When the clock in the hall struck nine, however, he came out of his absorption suddenly, and said good-night in evident haste.

" I'm not quite sure what time my mother will get here, and I wouldn't for anything not be there," he said to Mrs. Sheldon, as he thanked her for her hospitality.

" Want us to wait with you? " offered Jim, for himself and Brucey.

" No, thanks." He took two or three quick steps toward the hall, and then stopped to include them all in a grateful glance. " I've had just the nicest kind of a time," he said, and added, " I'm sorry to have to hurry—excuse me, please."

" Your friend has nice manners, boys," Motherje said, when a moment later they heard him start on a run up the street. " Ask him again soon."

" We'll leave him to Susan. She knows how to manage him," answered Jim. " Who wants an apple? I'm going to get some."

"I'll go with you," volunteered Susan surprisingly.

"Bring a basketful," Robert Bruce suggested. He was deeply absorbed in reading "Kim" and had picked up his book as soon as their guest had departed.

Susan waited in the kitchen while Jim went down cellar. As soon as he appeared again, she said impatiently, "Why didn't Brucey tell about finding Jiggy?"

Her brother gave a surprised chuckle. "How did you know about that?"

"I was hunting for her myself—Derry was with me. We saw Brucey. I told Motherje, but I made her promise not to say anything about it." Susan took an apple and went to the sink to wash it.

"You see," she confessed, "I was going to draw Brucey out—make him believe that I thought he was awfully clever. It was mean of him to be such a clam and never give me a chance."

"Well, he thought Jiggy's mother and those other women were blaming you, and he got wrathy. He didn't want you to know anything about it."

Susan looked at her brother incredulously. "Do you actually mean Brucey didn't want me to know about it?" She had perfectly understood what Jim had said, but she could not believe her ears.

"Why, yes." Jim was hunting for something in which to put the apples he'd been polishing and did not see his sister's face. "He couldn't stand it to have you blamed because folks didn't take care of their children. He ——"

"How am I ever going to be nice enough to get ahead of him for that?" Susan interrupted, looking unusually meek.

"Well, keep it to yourself that you know. He told me not to tell, and I shouldn't have if you hadn't asked. Anyway, I thought it would be good for you to find out just how nice Bruce is." Jim snapped off the light preparatory to leaving the kitchen.

"I—I wasn't very nice to him this afternoon," murmured Susan without moving. "I should have expected him to want to get even ——"

"This getting-even business isn't all it's cracked up to be." Jim's voice sounded surprisingly deep and convincing. "You and Brucey try so hard to get ahead of each other that you can't stop for anything pleasant. Believe me, Susanna, this everlastingly saying the smart thing, no matter how hard it hits the other fellow, is dangerous. It gets you into the habit. Take the word of an old and experienced man."

To Jim's amazement his sister took what he said without argument—did not even object to being

called Susanna. He did not know that in the warm darkness he seemed suddenly bigger and taller, and that in his voice there was a reminder of Ellis.

"Come on," he said finally, a little worried by her silence. "They'll be wondering where their apples are."

Nothing had changed since they left the living-room, except that the black kitten had found its accustomed place and was sleeping quietly under Robert's stroking hand.

Impulsively, Susan selected the shiniest, rosiest apple she could find and held it under Brucey's nose. "Here's the nicest apple in the dish for you."

"Tha-anks," he murmured, putting out a groping hand. He could scarcely tear himself from his book—did not seem to realize who was speaking. Then, glancing up, a gleam of mischief came into his eyes, quick speech to his tongue.

"Faith, perhaps I'd be safer to choose it myself," he chuckled, looking at the apple as if he expected to find something wrong with it.

Susan thought at once of several brilliant retorts, but repressed them all. Finally she said with a sweetness meant to give him a pain in his conscience, "It was the best I could find. I'll get the dish, if you like, and you can pick out another."

Then the sight of his astonished face was too much for her, and she started swiftly across the long room to carry out her suggestion.

CHAPTER XIV

COINCIDENCES

In spite of a discouraging last rehearsal the performance of the trio at the club meeting went well. There was an awful moment when Peggy turned two leaves at once without noticing her mistake, and Susan, playing with one hand, managed to flop the page back with the other. Afterwards she was glad it happened; she enjoyed proving to herself that she could meet the unexpected and conquer it.

The only thing that really troubled her was that nothing was said to Connie about the Lanes' garden. She hadn't known how much she was counting on it until it did not happen. However, as she very sensibly told herself, things like that didn't come true all in a minute, or just when you expected them.

At any rate, it seemed a step in the right direction that Mrs. Lane continued to be the attractive, companionable person whom Susan had discovered in their cosy afternoon tea hour together. Another step, perhaps, that she gave Connie a cordial invitation to come as often as she pleased to consult some books Mr. Lane had just bought; books with

wonderful colored plates of gardens in various parts of the world.

"I wish I might bring them over to you and let you keep them as long as you like," Mrs. Lane said, as she took Connie and Susan home after the club meeting. "But Mr. Lane doesn't like to lend books. I'll show you where they are the first time you come, and afterwards you may call on them, if you like, whether I'm at home or not."

"That's a great privilege," Connie said gratefully. "I should love to call on garden books."

"These are very, very valuable," Edith remarked impressively. "I'm sure I don't see why Father wants to put so much money into books when his only child is perishing for a car of her own, and several other things she might mention."

"Keep them to yourself, I beg of you," her mother laughed, and just then the automobile stopped, and the Sheldons got out.

"I've a grudge against you, Susan," Edith called just before the door was shut, and then laughed as Susan looked back at her questioningly. "Tell you later," she said with an exaggerated movement of her lips, and Susan nodded, rather indifferently, her sister thought.

"What does she mean by that?" Connie asked as they went into the house.

"I'm sure I don't know. Nothing much, I sup-

pose. I dare say I shall never hear of it again unless I ask her—and I shan't. She's always being mysterious about something, and making us tease and tease to get it out of her."

"Why, Susan, I thought you liked Edith."

"I do and I don't," Susan responded. She was partly in the coat closet as she spoke, stooping to unfasten her galoshes, and her voice had a muffled, unfamiliar sound, as if she were trying to conceal deep feeling.

Connie looked at her as she emerged from the closet. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"She's nice—sometimes; I love to hear her play and—and look at her clothes," Susan conceded. "But she fusses me dreadfully. She thinks money can do everything. And she always wants me when *she* feels like it—not when I want to go. Oh, I can't explain it. It's just as I said in the beginning. Some I do and some I don't like her."

Susan started up-stairs abruptly. She really did not want to talk about this and least of all to Connie.

"Then, why do you keep on going with her so much? Why don't you just gently and gradually stop being really intimate? It doesn't seem just right to keep on accepting favors and attentions if you're irritated by her all the time. I can understand ——"

"No, you can't understand the least little bit," snapped Susan. To have Connie forget her own words in regard to keeping in with Edith, and think that she, Susan, was doing it for the favors she might get was too much. For a minute she was tempted to burst forth with an exact explanation of her motives; then she got hold of herself. This was the first big thing she had ever tried to do for Connie, and she wasn't going to give it up yet. Failure was not to be considered.

She had been going up-stairs slowly and now, reaching the top, she turned.—"Honestly, I can't just explain it," she said again soberly. "Probably I fuss Edith, too. We seem to rub each other the wrong way, but sometimes I do really like her, and I believe she likes me. And that's that." In the next instant she had whisked out of sight and hearing, leaving Connie to gaze after her perplexedly.

The long, comparatively mild autumn spun itself out, and changed into a season which showed a definite intention of living up to the name of winter. Not an imitation winter with bare sidewalks and dust-filled winds, but an old-fashioned one with frequent snow-storms, icy sidewalks, and even the occasional sound of sleigh-bells.

Susan writing a long letter to Ellis during the holidays said:

"Christmas did not seem like Christmas without you and Anne. We did half expect Anne might bring Archie Junior and surprise us all, but she gave it up, because Archie is coming on a business trip some time between now and summer, and she says she means to tag along, too. She's pretty busy finishing her book, but, of course, she has written you about that, herself. I'm just crazy to see that baby. I suppose he'll hate to be called a baby now, though.

"I do hope the firm will find it necessary for you to come back in the spring even if it will have to be only a flying trip. Daddy couldn't keep it to himself that you hinted there might be a chance.

"We are having gorgeous winter weather—heaps of snow, glittering icicles that drip down your neck if you happen to stand below them, and wonderful coasting. Skating, too, of course, though it's hard work to keep the pond clear. The boys think they do it all, but Frances Evans and I are sure we push very capable brooms.

"Edith Lane gave our crowd, and six other girls and boys, a sleighing-party the night before she and her mother went away for the holidays. Mrs. Lane and Motherje chaperoned us, and we had a wonderful supper at a hotel and got home in the moonlight about ten o'clock.

"Motherje is the strictest of all the mothers about having the good times on Friday evenings and getting home in good season. The boys are nice about letting her have her way, so, of course, I have to be. If folks want us they have to plan

their parties accordingly. We haven't been left out yet, but I'm always expecting we shall be."

Susan put down her pen, and sat for awhile thinking of Ellis and Ellen and the joyous, interesting letters they were writing home. Then she lighted her little desk lamp, a Christmas present from her father, and finished her letter.

Going into the house by way of the kitchen, one Friday afternoon after school had begun again, Susan found Connie ironing.

"What's that? My blue voile? You are a darling. I thought I'd ask you, but I didn't have the nerve." Susan pressed a cool cheek against Connie's flushed one. "I've been thinking for days that I must wash and iron it, but I was afraid I'd spoil it. I never could do it as beautifully as you do."

"Flatterer! Run along—if you watch me I shan't do it so well."

"Anyone coming to dinner—the table looks unusually festive?" asked Susan popping back again after she had left the kitchen.

"Yes. Rose telephoned that Neil is coming out with her, and, just before that, Roger had called up to say that he was in town and would be out for dinner. I set the table early so that I needn't be busy when they arrive."

"Doesn't it beat all the way those two get here together?" Susan said resignedly. "Rose will have her hands full as usual. You ought to take care of Roger, Con."

"Roger doesn't need to be taken care of. He belongs to the family," Connie answered shortly. And then, "Probably he'd come even if he knew Rose wouldn't be here."

Susan decided at once that it was the heat which made Connie sound cross. "Well, maybe he would," she agreed, but she felt that the chances were against it. "My, I don't wonder Edith called you an American Beauty rose! If you could see your face now!"

"Ironing's hot work," answered Connie, and bent over the blue voile with an absorption that prevented further speech.

"Well, you're a peach to do it," said Susan gratefully. She sauntered through the dining-room into the hall and met her mother just coming into the front door.

"Hello, darling, where have you been?" demanded Susan.

"In town to call on Mrs. Latimer."

"Oh, did you see Mary? And is she as gay and pretty as ever? I think she's the sweetest thing I ever saw."

"My dear, she was thrown from her horse the

day before Thanksgiving. She's been in bed ever since and—and no one knows how long she'll have to stay there."

"That lovely girl! Oh, Motherje, isn't that dreadful?" To Susan it seemed a tragedy too deep for expression. Then she asked again, "Did you—did you see her?"

"Yes. She heard I was there and sent down to ask me to come up-stairs. And then the questions she asked! She is trying to write, and she thought she could get first-hand information from me as to how writers begin. She had read Anne's latest story and liked it. She read to me a little story of her own which shows real promise. I was so thankful to be able to praise it and to tell her a way in which I thought she could improve it."

"But, Motherje, did she talk about that all the time? Didn't she say anything about her—her troubles—how awful it is not to walk around and go out of doors?"

"Not a word. She was so eager about the writing that her cheeks grew pink—you might almost have thought she was just staying in bed to rest after her good times. And her mother is quite as wonderful as ——"

"How can they be that way," Susan interrupted stormily, "when it makes me want to cry just to hear about it? And I hardly know her. Oh, I

don't see how she can bear it! You've always said she was an outdoor girl. Oh, poor, lovely little Mary! Of course she's older than I am, but somehow she seemed little and young the only time I ever saw her."

"She seems so now," Motherje said with a sigh. "I shall go soon again. I want to take Connie with me and ——"

"Not me!" Susan broke in. "I simply couldn't stand it to see her."

"I was going to say that if Anne came on I should have her meet Mary. They would enjoy talking about writing."

"Oh," murmured Susan with a feeling of relief. She put away her coat and hat in the hall closet as Motherje went up-stairs. Then walked into the living-room where Uncle Duncan was taking a nap in his accustomed chair.

He caught her in the very act of trying to tiptoe from the room without waking him, and called her back.

"Well, I've been waiting for the Baltimore Oriole and now she's flown in and almost out again. Come here, B. O.; I want to talk to you." This was his latest nickname for Susan whose golden head was a joy to him.

"Did the flutter of my wings wake you? I was trying to be so quiet."

"Wake me! Did you think I was asleep? I find it always easier to meditate with my eyes shut." Uncle Duncan looked at her with the aforesaid eyes full of mischief, and Susan's spirits went a notch higher. She always welcomed a diversion when she had been forced to think about sorrowful things.

"Do tell me something cheerful—very cheerful," she urged.

"Well, I can't say that it's really cheerful, but, at least, it satisfies our curiosity—in a degree," Uncle Duncan began.

Susan pulled over a small stool and sat down, leaning against the big chair. She liked to look at the glowing fire while Uncle Duncan was talking; this hour of the afternoon, this place seemed made for confidences. She hoped it would be something absorbing so that she could forget Mary Latimer.

"I've been trying for some time," Uncle Duncan lowered his voice excitingly and the listener felt a beginning thrill, "to find out something in regard to that story the violin girl told—you know—about the father of that poor chap listening in the hall."

"Yes." It was almost a whisper; this beginning promised well.

"Well, I've got this much." He held up his fingers to check off the items. "It was reported in the papers last May that a certain Derrick Marston, officer in the World War, and holding a position

in one of the Trust Companies, had wrongfully used funds belonging to the company, and had disappeared."

"Oh, dear; oh, dear!" breathed Susan. She had believed from the first that there wasn't a word of truth in Edith's story, and now—this. "Please go on," she said, dejectedly.

"Well, then, within a week it was found out that Major Marston's accounts were perfectly straight, and that another man was responsible for the shortage."

"I knew it. I knew that a man who belonged to such nice people couldn't have done such a thing," Susan responded with deep conviction. Her eyes were sparkling; she was wholly absorbed in the story.

"You never can tell. The people who belong to the other man may be very fine, too."

"Well, never mind them. Please go on about Derry's father."

Uncle Duncan shook his head. "That's just what I can't do. When I really tried some weeks ago to find out something I hadn't the slightest success; no one I questioned seemed ever to have heard the name. But this noon, when I was by merest chance walking a block with an acquaintance of mine, Mrs. Marston passed us."

"How did you know her?" Susan demanded

excitedly; it was always necessary for her to have every point in a story made clear.

"I was just about to say," protested Uncle Duncan, "that I didn't know her; I can't even remember having seen her go by here. But the man I was with took off his hat, and as soon as she was out of hearing, declared that she was one of the bravest women he had ever known. Naturally I was interested, and he told me about her.

"It was only a chance that I met that man, and a still stranger one that she should cross our path," Uncle Duncan went on solemnly. "You needn't tell me, B. O., that what the story-writers call the long arm of coincidence isn't many times part of the design in the web of our lives. It actually made me feel as if you and I are perhaps meant to help that woman and boy."

"But didn't you find out more than that?" Susan made haste to get in a word. "Probably a great many persons know as much as that, and they don't seem to have helped her. At least Derry's father hasn't been found, has he?"

"Wise Miss Oriole. You have found the weak point at once. I'm afraid we shall have to wait for more coincidences. But I did hear a little more; I can't see that it will help us, though."

"Oh, tell me—quick!"

"This acquaintance of mine was employed by the

same Trust Company, and he said Mrs. Marston won the admiration of all of them. She wouldn't believe for a moment that her husband was guilty, and when that was cleared up, she was equally certain he would be found.

"Of course, during the first few months there was a great deal of talk about it, and much money spent in the effort to find him. Then, gradually, everyone, except his wife and son, seemed to be convinced that he never would be found. It seems that for some time he had been on the verge of a nervous breakdown; it was easy to conclude from this that he might have—have taken his own life.

"At any rate, people stopped talking about it, and after awhile his wife and son dropped out of sight. At least, the man talking to me wondered where Mrs. Marston had hidden herself—seemed surprised to see her."

"You told him, I suppose."

"Why, no; I didn't. Somehow I had the feeling that she would tell anyone who needed to know. She probably has a good reason for deciding to come here and live so quietly."

"Oh, poor things! Poor things!" Susan murmured. It flashed into her mind that Mrs. Marston, before she opened her eyes that never-to-be-forgotten afternoon, had said piteously, "Derrick, I want you," and the boy had answered, "Mother,

it's Derry." Susan had supposed she was calling her son, but *he* knew. She ached with the memory of it.

"Oh, dear! It's like a story you read part of and never can finish; only much, much worse, of course," Susan said mournfully. "I don't see why that long arm of—of whatever it was made you feel that we could possibly ever do anything about it. And I can't understand either why they won't be friendly when we'd like to make things pleasant for them."

Uncle Duncan looked a little disconcerted. "I —I suppose I was too enthusiastic about the long arm of coincidence. It can't keep on long-arming for our benefit, can it? I'll have to admit that we're not much farther along on the road to helping them, but, at least, we know that the boy's father isn't what your violin friend made him out to be."

"Oh, well, I felt sure of that all the time." Susan was absorbed, and perfectly unmindful of the fact that Uncle Duncan seemed a little disappointed over her reception of his news. "How perfectly dreadful not to know whether he's alive or dead, or cold and hungry and suffering. Oh, if it were Daddy, I just couldn't bear it." She got up, walked about the room aimlessly, struck a chord or two on the piano, came back to stand in front of Uncle Duncan.

"No wonder that Derry looks sober all the time," she said pityingly. "And his poor mother! After this I shall look at every strange man I meet to see if I can fit him into being Derry's father."

Uncle Duncan shook his head. "Not much use, though I suppose we shall both sleuth a little. As I said before, about all we can do is to stand by and help if the chance comes."

"Do you think I'd better tell the girls?" Susan asked hopefully.

"I wouldn't. I've about decided that I shan't mention it to anyone except you. If it's easier for that poor little woman and her boy to keep their affairs to themselves why should I interfere with their plans? I've always found that when one begins to tell things they leak out in every direction."

"I always tell Motherje and Daddy," began Susan, and then stopped to consider the question again. "Once you said the boys could be more natural with Derry if they didn't know what Edith had said about his father, and I believe that's true. Perhaps it would be the same way with the rest of the family—at any rate, I'll agree not to tell anyone without asking you. Does that suit you?"

"Perfectly," answered Uncle Duncan, quite understanding that this was a sacrifice on the part of Susan who loved to be the one to tell things.

"You're a very clear-sighted, reasonable girl, Susan; I like having you for a partner."

Just as these words of praise were spoken, Robert Bruce sauntered into the room.

"Now, now," he began, guessing that he was being left out of some secret. "What's this I hear about partnership? Take me in, too, please, Uncledunk. There might be three partners in a firm, you know."

"There might be, but not this time, son," said Uncle Duncan smiling at Susan.

"All right for you. I might have a secret some time myself. Say, Susan, Cousin Jean says that, being Friday, I'm allowed to take some of us to the movie that's here to-night. I've asked Marston for the hundredth time, but he won't leave his mother alone in the evening."

"Good chap, that! I like him," interrupted Uncle Duncan.

"So do I," agreed Robert Bruce. "You can't beat me on that. Of course Jim will go, and what I want you to do, Susan, is to help me pick out two more boys, and then call up Frances and Peggy for me. And say, Susan, is the Edith-girl back in her humble home again? I suppose I shall have to ask her since she put me at her good right hand on the sleighing-party."

"Why not call them yourself?" Susan asked.

Then with an air of pretended innocence, " Who's going to be the fourth girl? "

Brucey stared at her blankly. " Why, the Edith-girl, of course. You can number them any way you like. Naturally, you're the first."

" Oh, I see. Glad you told me I'm invited." Susan's eyes and smile were saying, " Got ahead of you that time." She started toward the telephone. " I'll call Fran and Peggy. You'll need only one extra boy, for, much as you seem to want her, you can't have Edith. She and her mother are staying in New York another week."

CHAPTER XV

EDITH PLANS A JOKE

"THE scarf I picked out for you. I told Mother it looked like Susan. But I'm going to give you something else, too." Edith waved her hand toward an array of beads and glittering trifles strewn on her bed. "Of course this is more or less junk," she said airily, "but if you see anything you want take it."

Susan shook out the folds of the gleaming, colorful scarf, which had just been presented, and felt enormously complimented to have Edith say that it looked like her. "It's perfectly beautiful; too pretty to wear," she murmured. Her gaze wandered to the bed.

"Do you really mean that I'm to have something from there? You ought not to give me so much." Even to her own ear this protestation sounded halfhearted, for her eye had caught the enticing gleam of a blue and silver necklace which seemed asking to be hers.

"Of course I do; more than one thing. I got Father out for a walk by ourselves one day and

this is the result—or part of it. Lately Mother doesn't like to have me buy so many—well, what she calls gewgaws. So I have to plan my shopping trips. Gewgaws is a horrid name, isn't it? Makes 'em look too cheap for words." With a quick movement she swirled them into a tangled mass. "I don't believe you'll want any of them, anyway."

"Oh! Don't!" Susan's protest held real feeling. "There were some blue beads—with silvery links—I loved 'em!"

"Lucky you said silvery—they're not real silver, you know." Edith, in high good humor again, laughed at Susan's expression. "Baby! She should have her blue beads."

She put the chain over Susan's head and stood back to get the effect. Then she substituted for it a long necklace of pink beads. "The blue ones belong," she said with the air of one whose opinion is final. "You look sweet in those."

Impulsively she threw her arms around Susan's neck and hugged her. "I don't believe you're a bit glad to have me back, but I've been just crazy to see you, Honey."

Susan, who had stiffened involuntarily under the embrace, tried her best to hug cordially in return, but knew it for a failure.

"I *am* glad to have you back," she asserted. "Frances and Peggy and I were saying just yes-

terday that we missed you. And haven't I come over the very first afternoon?"

"So you have, darling. And I'm not going to quarrel with you even if you don't like me as well as I do you. Don't you want this little scent-bottle—it's to carry in your vanity-case."

"I don't own one, but this dinky little thing could go in my purse," Susan answered, sniffing appreciatively. "I love it. And now you mustn't offer me another thing."

"Did Peggy and Fran really say they missed me? That's good for a string of beads apiece. I was going to give them each something, anyway. Help me choose, will you?"

But it was Edith, herself, who selected pale-green beads, with sparkling white crystals to set them off, for Frances, and a long string of yellow ones for Peggy.

"Do you suppose they'll think these are too—too gewgawy?" she asked anxiously. "I don't want to look like a Christmas tree."

"I should say not. They're lovely—I mean the beads are. I think I must like gewgaws." Susan was waving them to catch the light and enjoying their sparkle.

"I'm going to tell Mother that," Edith said with satisfaction. "I told you I had a grudge against you, and I have. My mother's getting perfectly

impossible—perfectly impossible. And you're to blame for it, Susan Sheldon."

"What have I done now?" demanded Susan, laughing at Edith's exaggerated emphasis.

"Why, since that day you called on her she's been trying all the time to make me over to be like you, and I won't stand for it."

"I don't blame you. I should hate it—I mean I should hate being made over. Anyway, we're not the least bit alike; so it would be an impossibility, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know." There was a hint of resentment in Edith's voice. "Perhaps we're not so awfully different about some things.

"But my mother," she went on quickly, "my mother wants me to dress more simply, and not to drink tea and coffee and—well, all I can get out of her is that she likes the way you dress, and that you don't drink tea and coffee. I'm thankful enough you didn't tell her about any more of your good habits."

Susan laughed. "There aren't any more to speak of. You're awfully funny, Edith. You make me sound like a little prig sitting up and telling all my good points."

"Well, you know I always say straight out what I think," began Edith.

"Worse and more of it! I should hate to believe

you think I'm a prig." Susan was laughing, and perfectly good-humored. She was bound that on this first afternoon together there should be nothing to regret. "You know you don't mean all the disagreeable things you say, Edie; and we really don't mind much because we're so used to them." She had meant this for a soothing remark, and she did not realize how it would sound until it was fairly off her lips.

"Oh!" said Edith, and the exclamation held a whimper of distress. "Perhaps you say disagreeable things yourself once in awhile. I'd like to know how I'd get along here if I didn't have a—a sharp tongue. You three girls are so everlastingly superior—so sure of your family and your—your ancestors. The last time I was at Frances' house I stared at those family portraits until I wanted to make up faces at them."

Susan chuckled. "I suppose if your grands and great-grands were judges and ministers, and you had portraits of them you'd put 'em up, wouldn't you?" she said defensively.

"Maybe. Anyway, after I'd shown people I had 'em, I'd take 'em down and put up something really beautiful." Edith's eyes smiled for an instant then grew sombre again.

"You know you don't any of you like me very well," she went on, bringing up, as she so often did,

the question Susan hated to be obliged to answer. "You'd be delighted probably if you could use my tennis-court without having me around." She gave Susan a half-defiant, half-appealing glance, as if hoping she would contradict this.

Why should anyone always be asking if people liked her? For the hundredth time Susan felt an intense desire to express her own feelings as frankly as Edith had hers. She was sure she was willing to give up all the pleasures which a friendship with Edith made possible—all responsibility in regard to Connie's interests.

"I—I—well, sometimes I ——" she hesitated, wondering how she should go on, and in the interval caught another glance from Edith, this time all the defiance gone, and wistfulness in its place.

Susan's feelings veered like a weather-vane. It was taking an unfair advantage to say such things and then look like that. It seemed to her that she could see another Edith, hurt, pleading, looking out through those dark eyes as if they were windows. She was usually so little fanciful that this feeling worried her, but, nevertheless, she was conscious that her purpose to say all that she might say was slipping away—had gone.

"Sometimes I don't like you a little bit." This did not seem a good beginning, but the friendliness of her smile was disarming, and Edith's expression

brightened. "It's when you try to make us do just as *you* want, and, if we don't agree, you threaten to give up playing the trio—or whatever we may be doing. It's like the way we used to take our dolls and go home when we were children."

"Well, I suppose I've got to stick up for my own way sometimes; no one else will do it for me. And if I don't you'll always be having *your* own way."

Susan looked a little bewildered. This point of view had not occurred to her. She was still determined, however, that nothing should spoil the afternoon.

"Probably Fran and Peggy would have something to say if I did," she answered, and then went on quickly, "Oh, Edith, do you skate? We couldn't either one of us remember yesterday whether you'd ever mentioned it.

"Probably you don't like it at all," Susan hurried on without giving Edith time to answer. "I know you don't care for exercise the way we do. But we all said that if you'd only try we'd all promise to take turns holding you up." Deep in her mind Susan was wondering if Edith would have any idea what a heroic promise this was. It was no fun to do that for a beginner—particularly someone who wouldn't be likely to try.

"Skate!" began Edith, and then, as if some idea

had entered her mind to change what she was about to say, was silent. A queer smile hovered about her lips, and there was a gleam in her eyes which, to Susan, seemed to indicate Edith's usual dislike for doing anything that required effort. "Oh, skating," she said at last with sulky indifference. "I suppose you're all wonders at it."

"Oh, we can all skate pretty well." Susan didn't want to make much of their skill—that would be too discouraging. "You see we go every afternoon while the skating lasts and we don't want you to feel that you're left out. I suppose you have skates—you always have everything."

"Yes. I can manage to stand up on 'em, I guess."

"That's a good deal. We'll teach you in no time. Oh, Edie, it's the greatest fun when you can swing off by yourself or with someone who skates just as well. Perfectly lovely to struggle against the wind, and then turn around and be blown back. You'll just love it. They're all on the pond this afternoon, I suppose." Susan glanced toward the window and involuntarily sighed. "But Saturday afternoon's the great time. Do come to-morrow, Edith. I'll ——"

A knock on the door interrupted her, and the maid entered. "Your mother would like to have you both come down for tea, Miss Edith."

"Oh, fudge! I'd rather have it up here. Well, you'd better say we'll be right down." A few moments later, just before they went into the living-room, Edith held Susan back to murmur mysteriously, "Don't say anything about skating before Mother; she's—she's so afraid her only child will get broken."

Susan nodded, but, as usual, the idea of having to keep something back made her uncomfortable.

Edith, on the contrary, seemed to delight in mysteries, for, as soon as she got into the room, she hurried across it and whispered in her mother's ear.

"Excuse me, Susan," she said hastily. "That just wouldn't keep." Then, turning to her mother again, "She did like them, you see."

Her mother looked at her blankly for an instant, and then, as Susan approached, holding out the blue necklace, smiled. "Oh! That looks very pretty, I'm sure. Edith's method of heaping them together didn't appeal to me. How will you have your tea to-day, Susan?"

"Just hot water and lemon and sugar, please, Mrs. Lane," put in Edith, before Susan had a chance to answer. "And I'll take the same order. I'm going to be a good little girl like Susan." She minced across the room to give Susan her cup, and drew down her face solemnly as if that were all

a part of being the good child she had promised to be.

Susan laughed, and tried to think it all as funny as Edith seemed to consider it, but she did not enjoy being made fun of any better than usual, and she was glad when she could reasonably say that she must go home.

Once during the half-hour over the teacups, Edith had burst into sudden and unexplainable laughter. "Oh, I can't tell you what it is," she gasped, when her mother had impatiently demanded the reason for her mirth. "I'm thinking about a joke—a perfectly wonderful joke. I'll tell you both sometime—not now." She laughed and gasped and wiped tears from her eyes. "It's a joke on someone you know, Susan. You'll see how funny it is soon." The last word ended in a squeal, and she laughed again.

"There, there, Edith! Stop!" said her mother sharply. "I can't bear to hear you laugh that way."

It was then that the clock struck five, and Susan said she must go. Edith, quite over her laughter now, followed her into the hall and held her coat for her.

"If—if you still want me," she said hesitatingly, in a low voice, "I'll try to come to the pond tomorrow. That is if you think you can stand it to—to help me learn to skate."

At this moment there was nothing Susan wanted less to do. All the warmth of her fervent promises had gone from her heart. Nevertheless, she must, of course, stick to what she had said.

"All right, do come. Shall I call for you?" She was fastening her collar, which was a little tight, and she hoped that would excuse any lack of enthusiasm in her voice.

"No. If I decide to come I'll have Thomas bring me over to the pond and put on my skates. Then you and the other girls can do the rest." Once more there was a queer look in Edith's eyes; for an instant it seemed as if she were going to laugh again.

"We'll be watching for you," Susan said hastily. "I'll try to keep near that end of the pond until you do come." And then she hurried out of the house, partly because she was afraid that she should keep on making promises, and even more because Edith had started toward her with open arms as if she were going to be affectionate again. For some reason her expression made Susan think of a child who means to be naughty, but is half sorry for it.

Susan ran down the steps and the driveway, and drew a deep breath of relief when she made the turn which took her out of Edith's sight. It was good to be out in the clear, crisp air with a red sun throwing beautiful lights on sky and snow.

When she turned into her own street her attention was attracted by a man, coming toward her, who looked vaguely familiar. As he came along, he stopped to go up the walk of one of the houses and glance at the number.

Susan decided that he was a stranger and that he would probably ask where someone lived. He was a tall, dark, well-dressed man with a serious, good-looking face. Susan felt almost sure that she had seen him before. Then, just as he reached her, she knew why he looked familiar—he was like Derry Marston—only grown-up.

She was conscious of intense excitement—of a large lump in her throat—of a desire to fling questions at him!

The next minute he took off his hat and asked if she could tell him where Mr. Snow lived.

"T-two houses farther along this way," said Susan, coming out of her rosy dream as fast as she could and stammering in her embarrassment. "It's the one where the porch-light is already on."

As she walked along she told herself that she might have guessed who this was. Mrs. Snow had told her only a few days ago that Mr. Snow's brother, who had never been in Melford, was expected.

"He looks exactly like Mr. Snow. That's why I thought I'd seen him before," she said to herself.

She made up her mind that she'd stop picking out fathers for Derry—it was too disappointing. Very likely Derry didn't resemble his father. Anyway she was no good at sleuthing, she was sure.

Before Edith arrived at the pond the next afternoon Susan was bristling with impatience. Why hadn't she insisted that Edith should set a time? Why had she promised to stay at this end of the pond until she came? It was disgusting that this afternoon neither Frances nor Peggy could get there until late, and she would have to take the whole burden of this first skating lesson.

While she waited Susan skated in circles, practiced all the fancy steps she knew, and gave Jiggy Grant, and some other children who were playing at the edge of the pond, rides on their sleds.

Girls and boys came up to ask her to skate, but she had to refuse. She was just arguing with Brucey over the impossibility of going off with him, when they saw the automobile stop and Edith got out. She came slowly across the field between the road and the pond, with Thomas following. When she discovered Susan she waved her hand.

"Togged-up as usual," commented Robert Bruce. "You'd think to look at her that she was a prize skater. And you've got to give up your good afternoon to hold her up."

"Well, what if I have? I asked her to come.

And I suppose she's allowed to wear a sweater and scarf and tam to match, isn't she?" Susan was at once on the defensive, and not in the least unwilling to vent some of her impatience on Brucey.

"Of course, I didn't expect to have to do all the holding-up," she went on more mildly. "But the others can't get here early, and I don't see a sign of Jim."

"Let me help. I'll be good—truly I will——" began Robert Bruce, but at that moment Susan darted forward to meet Edith who had reached the edge of the pond.

Brucey circled aimlessly for a moment or two, wondering what he'd better do about it all. Then he skated slowly off, half-hoping Susan would call to him, and meaning surely to come back before she should get really tired.

CHAPTER XVI

SUSAN HELPS AND EDITH HINDERS

"UNTIL I learn we'll just keep along the edge, won't we?" said Edith, when her skating shoes were on, and she had been helped to her feet. "That'll be all, Thomas. Come for me at five. We'll take you home, Susan, but Frances and Peggy may walk for all I care. I'm cross with them for not being here to help me."

She was confusing all she said by little shrieks of laughter, and teetering wildly on her unsteady feet. She looked each minute as if she would go down, and Susan began to think it a miracle that she didn't.

"Oh-oo! Don't let go of me! Hold me tight!" Edith's shrill tones made Susan feel like getting out of sight.

"I haven't let go of you for an instant," she protested. "You're all right. Don't scream so. You'll have all those nurses and children coming to watch us."

"I don't care who sees me—anyone may come." Edith's right foot slid along helplessly, and she bent so far back that it took all Susan's strength to bring

her into comparative safety again. During this, there were bursts of laughter and a succession of high-pitched squeals which drew the attention of the passers-by. Then Edith's left skate caught in her companion's right, and Susan went down.

"Oh, Susan, don't leave me standing here alone! You almost pulled me down. I shall fall. I know I shall."

"Fall if you want to, but don't drop on me," answered Susan, scrambling to her feet in a hurry. She was trying hard to keep her patience, but she hated to provide so much amusement for other people. By this time an audience of children had assembled; worse than that, girls and boys, skating by, swerved toward the place where they were or stopped altogether to watch for awhile.

"Suppose you let me try to tow you over to that first bend in the pond. That's the way I learned to skate by practising in a little cove like that. Probably I can get Brucey to help us." Susan looked around anxiously—perhaps there was someone near who would find Brucey. She wished now that she had accepted his offer of help. It was a good thing that he never laid up anything against her—was always ready to make up.

Edith's sharp protest brought her eyes and thoughts back to the demands of the moment. "No! I won't have a boy to help me. If Frances

and Peggy were here I'd let them. They—they've partly spoiled my—spoiled something for me by staying away."

"They couldn't help that; they wanted to get here early. Anyway, I don't believe Peggy could have done much—she's so small." Susan, trying to muster patience, wondered vaguely what Edith meant by something spoiled, but forgot it almost immediately.

"Let's try again," she said hopefully. "I don't believe I'm a very good teacher. Perhaps, now we're rested for a moment, we'll have more luck."

"Oh, Susan, don't be so sweet and patient. You ought to scold me because I don't do better. I'll try harder now."

Susan couldn't in the least understand the curious expression which lingered in Edith's eyes for a fleeting instant. She looked ashamed—affectionate. Susan felt herself in danger of one of those sudden embraces, and wondered whether she could stand up under it. Then all the softness vanished, and there was only the mocking gleam which never meant anything pleasant.

Then followed what seemed to Susan an interminable time of tottering efforts at striking out; of desperate struggles to keep Edith on her feet. Twice these struggles ended with Susan down on

the ice, and Edith miraculously on her feet, filling the air with laughter. There was always someone looking on who laughed, too.

Susan hated being made ridiculous, but Edith did not seem to mind. Once, as Susan got to her feet, quite unhurt except in spirit, she had the queer feeling that the other girl in some way had kept her from going down hard. But that was absurd, of course.

The last time she went down Susan got up slowly. She had always thought of Edith as about her size—perhaps a little bigger and taller—but now the girl seemed to loom above her and to weigh a ton.

"I wonder what time it is," Susan said wearily, as she grasped Edith's arm. "I don't see why Fran isn't here; it must be nearly five o'clock."

"Can't be." Edith pulled down the gauntlet of her glove and pushed up the sleeve of her sweater to look at her watch. "Too bad the time seems so long to you, Honey; I got here at three and it's only quarter of four now."

"I—I can't believe it," Susan answered with a heartfelt sigh. "Your watch must have stopped." But when Edith held the watch nearer, Susan could see the second hand moving just as usual.

"It's too bad you should have all the trouble of holding me up." Edith said this in such an apolo-

getic way that Susan felt ashamed of her fierce desire to get away from her obligations. Hadn't she proposed this and urged it, herself? Well, then!

"I believe that if you would let someone else help you for awhile," she was trying to sound kind and reasonable and not at all as if Edith were a burden, "perhaps you'd get along better, and feel that you'd really learned something this afternoon."

"You don't see Frances and Peggy anywhere?" Edith was looking eagerly at the passing skaters as if she hated to give up the idea of being helped by these two girls. "I hoped they'd get here before—before ——"

"Before what?" asked Susan.

"Oh—before you got tired out and had to give up. Tell me, is Jim here? And is he a good skater?"

"Why, pretty good—good enough. I don't believe he's here though." Susan was so surprised at the question that she said the first thing that came into her head.

"I suppose you think anyone who could stand would be good enough for me," Edith answered sharply. "There's that Carter boy skating round all alone; he looks like a good skater."

"He's a wonderful skater. He's probably waiting for Tessie Andrews. Say, Edie, do you think

you could manage to stand alone while I spin around the bend of the pond and look for Brucey? I won't be five minutes. And he'll help you; he's awfully nice when he wants to be."

"I have yet to see him when he wants to be, then," grumbled Edith, whose eyes were fixed on the Carter boy doing fancy steps where the pond widened somewhat. "Go ahead! Hurry up! If I can't stand I'll sit down the way you did. I don't mind if you bring Brucey back with you. I shall rather like it." Unconsciously her feet made little sliding movements as if they were going to dance.

Susan, starting away, caught something of this and wheeled suddenly. "Are you falling?" she asked anxiously, but by this time Edith was still again and apparently all right.

"Oh, do go on," she said impatiently. "I can't stand as still as this much longer."

To Susan it was such a delight to swing off by herself, with the wind, like cool fingers, tapping her cheeks, that she wondered how she was ever going to make herself go back again. Not long after she got around the bend of the pond she saw Robert Bruce skating toward her, which was lucky, of course, though she would not have minded hunting for awhile.

"Oh, Brucey," she said, as soon as they were

within speaking distance, "will you help me out with Edith?"

"Sure. Didn't I say I would? Where'd you park her?"

Susan giggled. It was such a relief to have someone come to her aid so willingly that she felt almost foolishly happy. "We haven't got far from the place where you last saw us," she confessed. "Brucey, I never saw anyone so awkward as Edith is about learning to skate. You might almost think she was trying to be clumsy. And everyone stopped to look and laugh—it was horrid."

"I'll start her machinery going," said Brucey grimly. "You're not big enough, anyway, to hold her up. Leave her to me."

By this time they were rounding the curve of the pond again, and Susan looked eagerly toward the place where she had left Edith.

"Why—why, she isn't there," she said in a troubled voice. "Do you suppose anything's happened to her—that they've taken her away?"

"Great Scott! No! Probably someone she knows has taken pity on her and towed her off."

Standing in what seemed the very spot where Edith had last stood, Susan scanned the shore of the pond and the road, but there were few persons in sight, and no one who resembled Edith.

"I—I somehow fancied she might have tried to

get up on the bank," she murmured, turning back to the pond to find Brucey's attention rigidly fixed on that wider, almost circular, portion of the ice which frequently was occupied by someone ambitious to be a fancy skater.

"That's Jerry Carter," said Robert Bruce, and then in a queer voice, "Who's the girl?"

Susan stared, and, without believing her eyes, saw a girl in white sweater, scarf and cap talking to the Carter boy—a girl who seemed to be dancing on her skates even while she was standing still. She was evidently telling something—an amusing experience—for Susan could see that Jerry Carter was laughing. And then, under her still unbelieving gaze, the two started off with a long, swinging stroke.

She was white with anger when she turned to her companion. "That's—that's Edith," she stammered, ideas coming to her so fast that she could scarcely find words for them. "Making me think she couldn't skate is the joke she nearly had hysterics over yesterday. And that's why she was so fussed because Fran and Peggy aren't here; she wanted to play this silly trick on them, too. But why? What have we done to her?" Susan stamped her foot in the intensity of her feeling, and gazed at her companion as if he were responsible.

"Don't blame me for it," he protested. "Queer

sense of humor she must have. I should think she'd have more pride than to make such a spectacle of herself just for the sake of a joke. But never mind her, anyway; come and ——"

"Not mind!" stormed Susan. "How can I help it? She's told Jerry about her wonderful joke, of course, and now there'll be others. They're beginning to stop to watch her now. Oh, I can't bear her! I—I never want to speak to her again. I'm going home." She dropped on one knee and began feverishly to untie her skating shoes.

"Hold up. You don't want to go home just yet." Robert Bruce had taken the strings from her hand and calmly tied them again. "You and I are going to take a nice long skate; and then we'll come back, with you not caring a snap about any mean old trick that Edith-girl has played on you. Why —why"—Brucey was secretly pleased with his own eloquence—"why, when you get near her again you'll just wave your hand and say, 'I'm a pretty good teacher. What?' And before that, the breeze will give you some color, and she'll never guess that you cared at all. That's the way to take the wind out of her sails."

"Color!" Susan repeated incredulously. "I should think I'd be as red as a beet I'm so angry."

"You're past that stage. You're white with rage, as they say in stories. No, sir, I wouldn't let

her have the satisfaction of looking at you now for anything in the world. By jingo! That girl can skate!" This last was an involuntary tribute wrung from Brucey in spite of his unfriendly feeling toward Edith.

Susan, keeping a stormy silence, was forced to admit to herself that Edith was one of the best skaters she had ever seen. Just now she seemed to be teaching Jerry Carter—actually teaching Jerry Carter!—some new steps.

"Come on," said Susan, still so angry she could hardly make her voice sound pleasant. "Let's skate and skate and not come back to this part of the pond. We can go home another way. I will not see Edith again this afternoon."

There are often times when one plans definitely and decisively, and then some slight occurrence may cut those plans out of existence; may even change the course of a life temporarily or permanently.

At the moment Susan finished speaking, a boy, one of Brucey's classmates, stopped as he was skating by on the other side of the pond and whistled imperatively.

"Do you mind waiting a second, Susan?" Brucey asked. "I've been looking for him most of the afternoon; we've got to get together about something, but I'll make a date with him for later on."

"Go on. Don't mind me." Nothing seemed to matter just now to Susan except the one big thing. She was even glad to have Jiggy Grant push her sled out from the edge of the pond to her and beg for a ride. At least that would keep her from looking always toward the place where Edith and Jerry were still entertaining an absorbed audience.

Having had one ride Jiggy pleaded for another. Brucey's friend was still keeping him, so Susan went with long strokes a still greater distance, pulling the sled from side to side and making Jiggy shriek with joy. Then she skated backwards slowly, talking as she went.

"Now, Jiggy, you go back to Martha—she wants you," she said, as they reached the starting-point. "I guess she's going to take you home now."

"All right," agreed Jiggy with unexpected docility. "I want to tell Harley you rided me." She gave her sled a few ineffective pushes toward the shore, then stopped to look at Susan again. It was in her mind that she might get another ride if she waited.

Susan wheeled in a wide turn hoping Brucey might realize that she was getting impatient. As she came around to the direction in which she hated to look, her heart seemed to stop beating, and her knees shook. Edith was coming toward her at a

flying pace—was near at hand. Short of turning in a panic and skating away as fast as she could there was no chance to escape; even then Edith could overtake her if she chose. Susan gave one despairing glance at Brucey, whose back was toward her, and waited.

She could not help taking a stroke backward as Edith, cheeks red and eyes bright with excitement, swept up to her with outstretched arms. Susan could almost feel the hands on her shoulders, but she avoided them by her involuntary retreat.

"Oh, Honey," cried Edith in evident disappointment. "Are you going to be horrid and not like my surprise? I thought it was such a good joke, and Jerry Carter laughed and laughed."

"I didn't think it was funny," Susan answered with stiff lips. It seemed to her that she was keeping the real Susan, who was longing to say angry, cutting, dreadful things, locked up inside of her. This was someone else talking now, someone who hated scenes and would not help to make them.

"I thought you prided yourself on being a good sport," Edith began sulkily. "I'm sure I don't know why I never told you I could skate. I learned years ago, and then later there was a teacher who gave lessons in fancy skating. I've even taken some lessons while I've been away with Mother this time. It's the one outdoor thing I really like to do."

Susan had no answer for this. She was wishing that Brucey would come—that Edith would go away.

"I can't see why I never bragged about skating when you were so—so scoldy and superior over tennis and basket-ball," Edith went on. "Anyway, I was just going to tell you yesterday that it was the best thing I did, when you started in taking it for granted I couldn't skate, and promising to hold me up. Then I thought it would be screamingly funny to—to let you three girls carry out your kind plans."

"Did you tell your mother what you were going to do?" Susan felt she must know this. She hated to think that Mrs. Lane who had seemed so friendly could ——

"No," answered Edith, her color deepening. "I whispered to her that she mustn't mention skating—that I wanted to surprise you. It's quite true, though, that she always worries when I go on the ice," she ended defensively.

Susan scarcely took in the last words. She was seeing herself as she walked across the room to show the blue and silver chain to Edith's mother. As soon as she got home she would send back that chain and everything else Edith had ever given her. It almost frightened her to feel so angry.

"I will say, though," Edith went on, after a

pause which brought no response from Susan, "that I didn't mean you should do it all. I just wanted to see if—if I could act a part. And I was cross with Fran and Peggy for not coming. But I didn't keep you at it so awfully long, now, did I?" Her voice took on its most coaxing inflections.

"Long enough," answered Susan, in the colorless tone which she could not recognize as her own. "Long enough to make everyone stop and stare and laugh at us. It'll be some time before I shall hear the last of your beautiful joke."

As she stopped speaking she looked across the pond again. Good! Brucey had turned away from the boy now—was evidently delaying for a last word. He would get her out of this in no time. Her gaze came back to Edith unwillingly.

"Look here," said Edith, and there was challenge in her manner, "if you're as grouchy as you seem to be why don't you say it right out and have it over with? Then we'll make up, and I'll teach you the new fancy steps I know. Anyway, I can stand anything better than this—this frozen scorn you're handing out to me."

She looked at Susan expectantly. It was hard for her to believe that anyone could stay angry with her for long. Receiving no response, the

corners of her mouth drooped and her eyes besought the girl confronting her.

"Oh, Honey-girl, I'm so sorry I did it," she said pathetically. "Truly I didn't think you'd mind so much. You know I'm really awfully fond ——" Something just beyond Susan caught Edith's gaze and stopped all speech. With a little cry she darted forward.

Susan, realizing only the unexpected move in her direction, struck out backward. The next instant something pushed against her, and in her effort to get out of the way, she went down, striking her back sharply on Jiggy's sled.

For a few minutes the hurt of it blurred all knowledge of everything else, though she seemed to hear Jiggy's whimpering replies to Edith's scolding remarks. Then Brucey's voice came from close at hand, and she opened her eyes.

"Oh, Susan, I'm so sorry," wailed Edith. "The little goose was pushing her sled without looking to see where she was going, and I never noticed her till she was almost touching you. Even then I believe I could have stopped her if you hadn't moved."

"I—I was afraid you were going to hug me," Susan murmured, with an uncontrollable shudder.

That was a sharp hit for the Edith-girl, and she looked so white and frightened that, for once,

Robert Bruce felt sorry for her. He put in a quick word. "It's shivery business lying there on the ice, and you got a pretty hard bump, Susan. Do you feel like getting up now?"

Jiggy's sled had kept Susan from going wholly down, and she was leaning against it now. "I s'pose I feel like it," she answered, looking dazed and uncertain. "Anyway, I want to go home. I —I wish I hadn't come."

Without waiting for help, she tried to sit up and to draw up her feet, but for some strange reason they did not move. Then a cruel hurt in her back caught her again, the bright afternoon grew suddenly dark, and the last thing she saw was Brucey's scared face floating off into nothingness.

CHAPTER XVII

STANDARDS AGAIN

THE weeks that followed no one in the Sheldon family ever liked to remember. To have Susan lying in bed, sober, wistful, often stormily resentful, was a calamity hard to face. After awhile the worst of the pain was over, and gradually the bruised back lost its soreness, but the active feet which had danced through life so gaily still refused to obey her will.

Doctors came and went, until Susan protested and begged to be let alone. "Please ask Uncle Duncan not to hunt up another," she said with twitching lips when her mother came back to the room after the latest one had departed. "I'm so tired."

"This doctor agrees with the others that there is a chance for you to get over this. He thinks it may happen as suddenly as the injury did." Motherje was trying to be very cheerful, but falling a little short of it.

"You don't believe that any more than I do." Susan felt herself by now an acute judge of tones

and expressions. "I haven't the least bit of faith in their 'one chance in ten.'" She closed her eyes wearily, and her mother saw with a pang how pale and worn the child looked.

"I had a note from Mary Latimer this morning," Motherje said after a moment. "She sent you a message."

"Did she?" All the old eagerness was gone from Susan's manner; she didn't even open her eyes.

"Here it is; I'll read it. 'Please tell Susan I've about decided to race her on getting well. My latest doctor has dangled a tiny hope before my eyes, and I'm going to try to make it grow. Much love to her.'"

Susan's eyes came slowly open. "I never shall be brave like Mary Latimer," she said gloomily. "If I—if I'm never going to walk again, why I've got to bear it, I suppose. But please don't expect me to be cheerful and—and heroic about it. Perhaps, after awhile, I shan't be quite so much of a grouch. But I'm not going to promise. Probably I shall be just as bad for—for the rest of my long life." She swallowed hastily and turned her head away.

"Darling, you don't have to promise; you're not a grouch." Motherje took Susan's hand in a warm clasp. "And—and even the longest life is divided

up into days, you know, and we need to plan for only one day at a time."

Susan pulled the comforting hand over against her cheek, but she said nothing.

"Do you think you'll feel like having a caller this afternoon?" Motherje ventured this question quite as if it had not been asked and answered several times in the last week.

"Oh, no! Please don't let anyone come. I—I don't want to see anyone."

"Not even Frances or Peggy? Perhaps they would help you to feel more like—more like the old Susan."

"She's gone—the old Susan, I mean. She'll never come back."

"Look here," began Motherje, outwardly heroic, but very shaky within, "if I had a fighting chance, and I'm convinced you have, I wouldn't give up."

"Did anyone ever say that *you* had only one chance in ten of walking again?" asked Susan, with an air of despairing finality that made her mother wince. "Oh, let's not talk about it. I'm here and I've got to stay here, and you certainly can't expect me to be very cheerful about it."

Motherje kissed the cheek that was visible. "It's heaps easier to be brave for someone else," she remarked understandingly. "But you can't

keep me from expecting fine things of my children. I hear Connie coming; it's time for your glass of milk. I'll run off and write a letter."

Susan turned her head in a hurry. "If it's to Mary Latimer give her my love. And come again soon, Mummy, darling." There was a fleeting hint of the old Susan in the look she gave her mother.

"Anyone here who could drink some milk?" demanded Connie, coming into the room with a tray. "I thought you'd like a piece of fresh sponge cake, too. And I've brought you something to feed your soul. Just smell!"

Susan, brushing her curly locks out of her eyes, sniffed rapturously. "Violets! Purple as purple. Where did you get them?"

"I met Mrs. Lane, and she insisted on taking me into the florist's shop while she bought these for you. She wanted to know how soon you're going to let her come and see you."

Susan laid the violets on the tray and did not touch them again. "I don't want to see anyone outside the family," she answered with decision.

"Well, feeling that way won't keep you from drinking this milk. And the sponge cake is delicious if I did make it." Connie straightened pillows, helped Susan sit up, took the violets to put them in a vase. "There's one thing about it," she

remarked casually. "You probably won't have to be bothered long about people asking to see you. It's so perfectly easy *not* to make calls."

Susan, sipping her milk, looked thoughtful. It hadn't occurred to her that this would be the result, but she saw the force of Connie's reasoning. Anyway, that did not change her feeling about it. If she saw others she must see Edith; that seemed the square thing. Ever since that afternoon on the ice Edith had deluged her with flowers and fruits and penitent notes, but Susan had left it to the family to acknowledge them. On her part there had been no softening toward the girl who had tricked her, and, worse still, made her ridiculous in the eyes of others.

"Oh, dear!" she murmured, not really meaning that Connie should hear it.

"What is it? Is the pain bad?" asked the sympathetic voice of this sister who never failed her. "Can I do anything to make you feel better?"

"No-o, it isn't pain—at least, it isn't pain in my body," Susan answered brokenly. She had a stifled, shut-in feeling; a longing to get out of bed, out of her room, away from the house. It was four weeks since she had gone down on the ice, and this was only the beginning of it. There would be months and years—a whole, long life. Somehow

the immensity of it all was heaping itself upon her this morning.

She looked up at her sister with wild protest in her eyes. "Oh, Connie, don't let it be always," she cried with passionate earnestness. "I can't be brave about it—I can't—I can't."

Connie went down on her knees by the side of the bed. There seemed to be nothing she could trust herself to say, but she took Susan in her arms and held her until the shaking sobs had quieted.

"Darling, you *are* brave," Connie said after awhile. "We all know it. Why, not one girl in ——"

"Don't say ten," protested Susan, wiping her eyes impatiently. "I've got a grudge against that silly little *one* that's always setting itself up against so many. And—and you can't make me believe I'm brave, though I'm glad you think so." Susan was fairly calm by this time. That unruly someone who wanted to say distressful things was safely locked up again, and in the other part of her mind she felt polite and grateful—and inexpressibly dreary.

"Susan, I'm going to ask you to do me a favor," her sister said suddenly.

"Ask *me?*" queried Susan. How in the world could she do anyone a favor? "Go ahead. I'll do anything I can," she assented.

"Well, then," began Connie, and taking a long breath plunged recklessly ahead, "Dr. Merrill thinks it will be a good thing for you to begin to see people, and I believe it, too. Now, will you promise to see the first caller who asks for you this afternoon?"

"And I've just begged not to have to see anyone! Connie, you've led me into a trap. Must I take the first one? Mayn't I choose?"

"No. That's the game of it—to take the first one. Let's see whom chance will bring you."

"Do you know who's coming?" Susan had a quick suspicion that it might be Mrs. Lane or Edith. "You haven't called up anyone? You wouldn't do that, would you?"

"I promise you not. Perhaps no one will come."

"And if no one does, I'm not to be held to my promise to-morrow," bargained Susan.

Connie agreed. "We'll make a new one then," she said with calm assurance. "And this afternoon we'll tempt Fate."

At half-past two, as if Fate itself had pulled the string for the rising of the curtain, the door-bell rang. Susan, wearing a jacket of peachblow pink, was propped against the pillows, waiting for Connie to give the last touch to her wavy locks.

"I'm going to run down," Connie said promptly.

"Motherje's out and I'm afraid Tillie will let someone escape. Now it's up to you to act your prettiest."

"Foolish! It's probably the umbrella man," said Susan calmly.

"Well, if he asks for you, he shall come up," floated back from the hall as Connie disappeared. Five minutes later she was back with shining eyes and a most enjoying expression on her face.

"If I had time I'd give you five chances and then you wouldn't guess who's down-stairs," she began breathlessly. "It's Derry Marston's mother and she's come expressly to see you."

"Is she really there?" Susan's voice held a thrill of anticipation; a hint of color stole into her cheeks. "I know my hair is sticking out every which way. Is my face clean?"

"You're—perfectly—all right." Connie took a critical look. "I'll go get her."

Susan waited with eagerness for the sound of approaching footsteps. "That coincidence thing that Uncle Duncan spoke about is long-arming again," she told herself with conviction. She had almost given up expecting to know Derry's mother and now, in a few minutes that lady would be coming along the hall—into this very room. Wonderful that she should be the first one after the promise to Connie!

Bracing her hands against the bed Susan lifted herself a little higher against the pillows. Her blue eyes looked interested—a bit curious; the color in her cheeks deepened, helped by the glow from the pink jacket. For a fleeting moment it seemed to her that the pull of her spirit might move her helpless feet—that she might rise and go to meet the coming guest.

Beside tall Connie, Mrs. Marston looked like a girl to Susan and absurdly young to be Derry's mother.

"Isn't it unbelievable that we should never have met since that day you came to my rescue?" she said at once, taking Susan's hand in both of hers. "It's wholly my fault, I know," she went on penitently, "and to-day I've come to tell you that I've reformed—that Derry and I are going to be better neighbors if you'll let us."

"Let you! I should say we would," responded Susan, with an energy that delighted her sister. "We like Derry awfully, and we couldn't think why—why you both seemed not to want to know us." To Connie's ears, Susan's interest, and the familiar frankness of speech were like music.

"I'm afraid that was mostly my fault," Mrs. Marston confessed ruefully. She sat down in the chair near the bed that Connie offered, and looked smilingly at Susan.

"Isn't she a picture in that soft pink?" She was appealing to Connie for confirmation. "I should like to put a black and gold screen behind her—or a drapery—and here, on this stand, a bowl of pink water-lilies and forget-me-nots, and then—paint her."

"Oh, are you an artist?" asked Susan. "I should love to see your pictures."

"I used to think I was." Mrs. Marston's smile held the wistful appeal that Susan remembered. "But I haven't painted anything since—well, not for a very long time. At least, it seems very long to me." The smile vanished, and she sighed unconsciously.

Susan was thrilled by the hidden meaning of these words. Of course Mrs. Marston meant that she had not painted since Derry's father went away—that must seem ages to her. Would she go on and tell them about it? Susan's hands grew cold in anticipation.

Tillie, appearing at the door, lessened the momentary strain. "Would you please come down, Miss Connie? There's someone ——"

"I'll come, Tillie." Connie started at once. "I'm sorry to have to be excused," she said to Mrs. Marston, "but this is Susan's call, isn't it?"

Mrs. Marston drew her chair closer to the bed as Connie went out of the room. "It really is

your call, and you're responsible for the fact that Derry and I are going to try to be better neighbors," she said impulsively.

"I?" queried Susan, surprised. "Why, what do you mean?"

"I wonder if I might tell you something about us." Derry's mother seemed to be mustering her courage. "Are you well enough to be burdened with the troubles of other people? If you aren't I'll say nothing more."

Susan, with an instant conviction of what was meant, had a moment of harrowing indecision. Should she confess that she knew something of the sorrowful story or should she be silent?

"I'm quite well enough," she began slowly; "perhaps I ——" it flashed into her mind that it might disturb Mrs. Marston to know that her story had reached Melford, and she instantly decided to be still and listen. "I'd like to hear anything you feel like telling me," she ended, and gazed expectantly at this new friend.

The story was largely what she had heard before, told from a different viewpoint, but without dwelling upon the suffering of those most deeply concerned. After the first hesitating moment, Mrs. Marston fixed her eyes on the far corner of the room and talked rapidly, with scarcely a break. Her breath came quickly and color burned in her cheeks.

Evidently she was not used to the ordeal of telling her troubles.

Susan, listening intently, was strangely moved, felt her eyes sting hotly, was grateful that she need say nothing.

" And so, after awhile," said Mrs. Marston, pausing for breath, " Derry and I felt that we couldn't stay where so many knew our troubles, and all were so kind and interested. It meant "—she shivered as if the memory hurt her—" it meant being asked every day by one or another whether we had heard from Derry's father. And while he was never out of our minds, it was terribly hard to have to talk about it.

" They were so good to us. I never shall forget it." Mrs. Marston's soft brown eyes came back to Susan's now. " But at last we had to decide that we must find some place where we knew no one, and try to keep our troubles to ourselves. And that is why we are here and why we are so unneighborly."

" But when Derry's father comes back—how will he know how to find you? " Susan couldn't keep back this question.

Mrs. Marston's smile seemed to thank her for this unfaltering expression of certainty as to his return. " One of my best friends was our next neighbor, and she understands and can direct him," she explained.

"You haven't told me yet why I am responsible for—for anything," Susan said after a moment's silence.

"I must have seemed so ungrateful for the kindness you showed us the day Derry was frightened about me. And so rude in not receiving or returning the calls your mother and sister were good enough to make." The brown eyes looked penitently into the blue ones, asking pardon.

Susan smiled. "I was dreadfully disappointed because you didn't invite me to come again," she confessed.

"Oh, my dear! I could hardly let you get out of the house without saying it. But Derry was so stiff and severe—and we had agreed solemnly that it was better not to get acquainted here. But that was a wrong state of mind, and, at least, we're not going to be hermits any longer."

"But I still don't see why I ——"

"Because it hurt me so to think I couldn't come to you when you were in trouble," explained Mrs. Marston simply. "I had to stay in my room for a year when I was about your age, so it seemed to me I could understand how you must feel.

"And last night Derry and I talked it over and decided that we had been wrong, and—here I am."

"I'm so glad. I wanted to know you. Please come often."

"I shall. Should you mind if I bring my work? Daylight is precious when one embroiders."

"I should love to see it. I remember those beautiful monograms."

"The monograms are still going on. I get very tired of doing table-linen, but it pays pretty well——" the sudden illumination of Susan's expressive face made Mrs. Marston pause. "Oh, my dear," she went on understandingly, "you didn't suppose I was doing those for myself, did you?"

"I don't know why I should have thought anything else," protested Susan.

"Of course one would think that. You see we needed money. I tried selling my paintings." Mrs. Marston smiled a little sadly over this last statement. "I vowed that Derry shouldn't leave school if I could prevent it. And I found this work to do." She paused and looked out of the window as if she were remembering the sorrowfulness of it all. Then she stood up and set her chair back.

"My dear, I didn't mean to burden you with my troubles. I must run away before I tire you completely." She bent over Susan and took her hand. "Forgive me, won't you, and let me come again."

"Please come. And don't think you've tired me. I loved having you tell me." Susan squeezed Mrs. Marston's small hand fervently. She could not

help thinking of the many stitches it had taken and was still willing to take to keep Derry in school. "Do you mind," she said, still holding it tightly, "if I tell you that I think you are very, very brave."

"I don't mind your saying it, but I'm afraid I'm not." Mrs. Marston shook her head wistfully. "Somehow it seems as if Derry should have had a strong, clever mother who would have gone out into the world and earned a lot of money. I haven't at all lived up to my own standards as to how one should behave when trouble comes." Her voice was low and troubled, but the next moment she smiled, kissed Susan's cheek and turned at the door to wave her hand. "I'm coming again soon," she promised, and was gone.

"Lived up to my own standards." Susan, listening to Mrs. Marston's retreating footsteps, seemed at the same time to hear these words of hers. Here was this bothering word "standard" again. It was strange how many ways it found to pop into her mind. What did Derry's mother mean by "standards as to how one should behave when trouble comes"? Susan stared at a patch of deep blue sky and considered the question.

Everyone had standards in one way or another, she supposed. She remembered that, as a child, she had been proud of herself for not crying about

splinters and bumps and cuts, and had scorned children who did. Probably that was her standard of behavior in case of hurts.

"I suppose if I were Brucey and liked writing up little note-books the way he does I should make a collection of standards," she said to herself. "A: standard of behavior in case of aches; B: for bumps, bruises and burns; C: for cuts and—and catastrophes." It was a sort of game and her mind ran on easily. "The D standard could be how to behave at the dentist's. E—well, what would E be, anyway? I can't think of anything but elephants and eels. F ——" she paused to consider, and was startled to hear in her mind, as clearly as if someone had said it, the word forgiveness.

"Oh!" murmured Susan, wriggling herself lower in the bed and burrowing into the pillows. "That isn't fair. I'm sure I haven't a standard for that, and I don't like this game any more. It's too—too personal."

She tried to think of something else, but that honest, stubborn mind of hers kept her in the path on which she had started. She had to admit that she had a definite standard as to how others should forgive her. She liked to have them pardon and then forget the offence—never twit her about it, nor show that they thought themselves noble for

having done it. That seemed to take care of the whole thing, she told herself.

She lay there, breathing quietly, thinking it over; for awhile she was scarcely conscious of anything except the struggle going on in her mind. Then she surprised herself by speaking aloud. "Oh, all right—all right. If that's my standard I suppose I shall have to live up to it." Even to her own ears her voice sounded a little cross, and quite as if she were answering someone.

It was disconcerting to have reached the point of talking aloud to another Susan shut up inside of her. She'd better stop thinking so hard. At least, about standards; she'd had enough trouble with them. And with that resolve scarcely put into words, her irrepressible mind quoted impishly, "Trouble! standards as to how one should behave when trouble comes!"

"Oh, do stop," the outside Susan said to the inside one. "I don't have to decide that, too." She felt distinctly irritated. It was a wonder that Connie couldn't come back by this time. Perhaps there was another caller; she remembered hearing the bell ring just after Mrs. Marston went away.

Five minutes later Connie came into the room, and the two sisters spoke at the same moment.

"Connie, would you ——"

"Oh, Susan, could you ——"

Connie laughed. "You go on first. I want time for my speech."

"Is it too late to telephone Edith? I want her to come and see me this afternoon."

Connie's dark eyes opened wide in astonishment. "Why, Susan, is this magic? Did you know she is down-stairs?"

"My goodness, no! Is she really? Oh, I—I don't know, then—perhaps I'd better put it off. I——"

"'There's no time like the present,'" quoted Connie, though she felt panicky, too. "I came up to ask if you possibly could see her."

"Listen!" began Susan impressively. "Tell her that she may stay for ten minutes. I do hope she won't cry and hug me. I—I don't think I could quite stand it."

"I'll fix that," promised Connie.

"Now, please make me sit up better before you go; and put the violets near me. I like them better than I did this morning. And, oh, Connie, just get the blue necklace Edith gave me out of my top drawer. Will it look silly to wear it in bed?"

"Not a bit." Having carried out the requests Connie gazed critically at her sister. "Fine! Turn the head a little, please. Wink all you want to. Now smile."

"Foolish thing! Go on." Susan smiled in

spite of her uneasiness. After all, it was funny to be scared.

Edith came into the room alone, anxious, pale, unnaturally quiet. She was evidently determined to be a perfect bedside visitor. But when she saw Susan, flushed and pretty, smiling at her, the enforced calm was shattered.

"You darling! If you hadn't seen me to-day I couldn't have stood it another minute." By this time she was on her knees by the bed, crying, fondling Susan's hand. "I'm so sorry I was bad to you that dreadful afternoon. So sorry for all the times I've been bad to you. So sorry! So-o sor-ry! So-o ——"

"Edith Lane, if you say sorry again I'll—I'll pinch you." It was Susan's most exasperated, most domineering voice, and it fell pleasantly on Edith's ears. "Get up!" Susan went on. "If you cry all over me any more you'll take the color out of my new pink negligée. Get up, and tell me about everything."

Edith obeyed meekly. "My, but it does seem good to have you ordering me around," she said, sniffing and wiping her eyes. "Don't breathe it to Miss Connie that I cried." She looked at her watch. "Six minutes left. You look a perfect love in that pink. Father's going to give me a new car—at last. To-morrow Mother's coming to see

you, and to ask Miss Connie to do our garden. I shouldn't have told that so don't let it out."

Susan felt a thrill of pure joy. "Really? Isn't that lovely?"

"We're sure the garden will be lovely," Edith went on with unwonted tact. "Mercy! Only three minutes now, and so many things to say I can't think of anything. I do hope you'll be well enough to help me plan my spring clothes. My dear, that blue chain looks ducky with the pink. I was afraid you'd never wear it because I gave it to you. Don't worry! I'm not going to say anything more about that. When may I come again?"

"Ask Connie. She's my manager."

"I will. Thirty seconds! Love you as much as ever. Good-by, darling." She kissed the top of Susan's head, patted her hand, and was gone.

Susan half-expected to see her come back, and lay there smiling. She felt a new lightness of spirit —as if something that hampered and irritated her had gone.

Connie, coming in just then, switched on the light and pulled down shades. After she had gone out, Susan heard her father coming up-stairs and, for the first time, noticed that his step was slow.

"Tired, Daddy?" she asked, as he stood in the doorway, smiling. She could see that he looked

tired. Had Father always had those anxious lines in his face, she wondered as he came nearer.

"How are you, pink Princess?" he demanded, ignoring her question. "Do I smell violets? I'm sure that I do."

"Yes. Aren't they lovely? Mrs. Lane sent them. And Edith's been calling on me."

"Really?" Father stooped to kiss her. "I knew that she had made frequent assaults on your castle. And so this time you let her in?"

"Connie did. I feel heaps better, Daddy. Sort of—well, mushy and gentle; not so tied up in hard knots. I don't believe it's good for anyone to keep a grudge, do you?"

"That's what wise persons have always been trying to teach us, darling. It's fine to have proved it for yourself."

Father's voice seemed partly to have lost the tired sound, and his eyes looked brighter. Susan's quickened sense realized something of what her trouble had meant to him.

"Sit down, Daddy, and lean toward me." When his face came within reach Susan smoothed his forehead. "This is a new line. Where did you get it? I'm afraid you've had me on your mind."

"You haven't been out of it for some time, my dear."

"Then that's a Susan line. I can almost see my

name on it." The persuasive fingers worked steadily for a few moments, then stopped.

"Darling Daddy," Susan said softly, "I'm a specialist in removing wrinkles, and this Susan line must be smoothed out. Will you please come every day for treatment while I'm in—in the house, because when I get out I shall be very busy."

This was the first time she had spoken with any confidence of the future, and her father grew in cheerfulness under her eyes.

"I'll be here, Doctor," he agreed. "I hope your fees are not too high."

"Not to the father of six children," answered Dr. Susan condescendingly. "To-morrow you may bring me a box of marshmallows, and that will pay up for a week."

After her father had gone, Susan had time to think things over while she waited for Connie to bring up her dinner. She fervently hoped Connie wouldn't mention gardens; it was going to be hard enough, anyway, to keep still about what Edith had said. She was eager to tell Uncle Duncan about Mrs. Marston, but to-night he and Jim and Brucey were in town.

A picture of Derry's mother came into her mind: the soft brown eyes, the friendly smile with its wistful appeal. She heard again the words, "I haven't lived up to my own standards."

"That's what you've got to do," remarked that troublesome inside Susan with the utmost clearness. "You can't let Daddy get any more lines on your account."

The outside Susan felt a little frightened. It seemed very hard—she did not know how to set about it. Then an illuminating idea swept doubt from her mind. "It's just being a good sport," she said to herself exultantly, "and I hope I know how to be that."

When one thought of it that way it didn't seem so hard, and, anyway, she was beginning rather to enjoy doing difficult things. After all, each day was a new day, and she could always begin over again if she failed.

For the first time in weeks life seemed tinged with pleasant excitement; it was like having a door swing open to give light and air to a dark, closed room. As she waited for Connie her cheeks grew pink, and her eyes shone like blue stars.

CHAPTER XVIII

SURPRISES AND SECRETS

"CHECKMATE!" said Jim unexpectedly, and grinned at Susan.

"No! I can't believe it. Let me see—suppose I hadn't moved my queen ——" Susan bent over the chess-board absorbedly.

"Well, that was clever of you," she admitted. "Anyway, I'll beat you next time."

"You really play very well," Jim said approvingly. "You're getting to be ver-y hard to beat, Mademoiselle." He got up from his chair and stood looking about the room. "This is the pleasantest room in the house—now," he remarked. "I like the bird and the gold-fish and the plants. It's like a picture with you in the big chair, togged up in a pretty dress and looking so—so pleasant."

"Humph! Pleasant! I was waiting for you to say lovely or beautiful or something like that. Anyone can be pleasant."

"Yes, but not everyone would be," answered her brother, raising his hand in a quick salute. "You're a good sport, Susanna, in more ways than

one. But, then, how can you help it, being my sister?"

"You needn't take any credit for it," Susan called after him as he left the room, but she was pleased in spite of her thankless manner. It meant something to have earned this praise from Jim. Boys were so critical about their younger sisters.

It had not been earned easily. Many times the effort to live up to her new standards had required more courage than she could bring to it. However, the door that had seemed to swing open never wholly closed, and there were frequent happenings that pushed it wider and made the slow days pleasant.

After all, they were not slow days in passing; it was only as Susan looked back on them that she could realize how many had gone by.

February blew itself out leaving a legacy of snow, and March, not to be outdone, had blown itself in, and was speeding along, seeming scarcely more like spring than its predecessor.

Now at the end of the second week in March, Susan had marked her progress by being promoted to a chair, and spent the greater part of each day by the window. With such a large family she had no chance really to be lonesome. It was to Susan the first announcement of new plans was made, and

she was permitted to know, days beforehand, any surprise planned by one member of the family for another. This was interesting, but also dangerous, for she was afraid that, in an inadvertent moment, some of this confidential information might slip out.

On this particular afternoon, after Jim left, Uncle Duncan strolled in to hear about her day and tell about his own. But before they got fairly started, Robert Bruce made his appearance with the intention of going on with the book he had been reading aloud to her.

" I'm afraid it won't be any use to begin," Susan explained, " for Edith has been taking Fran and Peggy for a ride in her new car, and I'm expecting them here any minute."

" You don't seem to have time to do any worthwhile things," Brucey said regarding her gloomily. " Those girls hang around so."

" Well, you can just believe I like to have them." Her spirited response pleased Uncle Duncan. " You can stick a nice little feather in your cap, though, Brucey, because you've made me like reading."

" Good for you." Brucey was pacified. " You and I could never be quite such pals if you didn't. And I—well, I rather like you for a pal." He strode over to the plants in the other window and

nipped off a leaf of lemon verbena. "That smells good, I'll say. Well, so-long. We'll read later, perhaps. I'll go and have a dig at my lessons."

"Speaking of lessons," began Uncle Duncan, when Robert was out of hearing, "have you started yet to make up any of your work? I remember you spoke of it."

"I know I did. I'm discouraged when I think of it. But you know I never found it hard *not* to study."

"H'm," murmured Uncle Duncan with a twinkle in his eye. "I may have noticed it, but it wouldn't be polite for me to remember it." And then, in the confidential tone Susan loved, "How would you like, B. O., to help me put some money in Mrs. Marston's hands?"

"I'd love it. How?"

"Why Derry happened to say last night that his mother is a college graduate and had done some High School teaching before her marriage. He says she's been no end of help to him, and I thought ——"

"That perhaps she'd tutor me," finished Susan. "Wouldn't that be a scheme?"

"My dear B. O., how you do get ahead of me. I was going to put it in many more words."

"Very likely she has kept right along with Derry." Susan was following out her own train

of thought. "He's a wizard about lessons. I suppose if I don't do well she'll think it's because she isn't a good teacher. I shall have to work awfully hard."

"Won't that be a shame, Miss Oriole?" Uncle Duncan's voice was most sympathetic, but his eyes were smiling. "You'd hate to have her give up and lose the money, wouldn't you?"

"I should think she'd rather earn it this way, even if I'm not very brilliant, than to embroider all the time. And, after all," she chuckled over a new view of the situation, "perhaps it won't matter if I am a little stupid. She'll feel all the more that she's earning her money."

"Rascal!" said Uncle Duncan, surveying her with fond admiration. "I leave it to you to work out the problem of your behavior. You and your mother can arrange terms and times. Only don't let the lady under-charge you." He rose hastily from his chair at the sound of the tooting of an automobile horn. "There are your friends; I must go."

And so it was arranged a few days later that five mornings in the week Derry's mother should appear in Susan's room at eleven and stay until one. It seemed really like an appearance, for, after the first lesson, Mrs. Marston never rang the bell, but ran quietly up-stairs, saying good-morn-

ing to Susan just before she crossed the threshold.

From the first, Susan found the lessons interesting. To her surprise her teacher seemed to have the idea that she was really a student, and liked to work hard, and Susan hated to have her find out her mistake. For some reason Mrs. Marston seemed to belong to her—was her discovery. As the days went on the friendship between teacher and pupil grew deep and sincere.

When April came it was decided that Susan should spend her afternoons down-stairs, and a shining wheel-chair greeted her the first time she was carried down.

Just for a moment she could not bear the sight of it—it made her trouble seem so—so everlasting, but Uncle Duncan, whose gift it was, stood close beside her. "You can't make him feel unhappy, too," said the inside Susan, and at this prompt advice, courage and self-control came stanchly to her aid.

"I guess Edith isn't the only one who can have a car of her own," she said, with an airy light-heartedness which she fancied convincing. "Please show me how to manage it, Uncle Duncan. I'd like to get up speed before the boys come home. I suppose Jim will want to borrow it whenever he goes across the living-room."

It was such a gallant resistance that it bolstered her own courage wonderfully. Before long she was wheeling about the room, across the hall, into the dining-room. It gave her a new sense of freedom.

One afternoon the best thing of all happened. Susan, resting on the living-room couch, and quite by herself for the moment, heard an automobile stop, and the bustle of arrival at the front door. They had been expecting Anne and Archie Junior, so she guessed at once who it was, but she was not prepared for the small, sturdy figure which came half-way across the living-room, gravely saluted, and said, "Where's Susan? I want to see Susan."

"You darling——!" began Susan, then stopped, held out her hand and became as gravely polite as he. "How do you do? Come and shake hands with Susan. My, but we're going to have fun together."

"Are we?" He moved a little nearer, still regarding her soberly. His eyes were a darker blue than his mother's and his hair just as red. Then he covered the remaining distance at a run. "I like you. I'll give you a kiss," he said to Susan's intense joy.

The next moment Anne was beside the couch, laughing, hugging Susan, pretending it was pride in her son that made her eyes shine with tears.

"We're going to stay until we all go to Brookfield," Anne said in answer to a question from Susan. "I'm going to find a small apartment near here where Junior and I and his nurse can stay; then we'll spend heaps of time with you. And by and by Archie will come."

"Lovely!" said Susan, with her eyes straying to her nephew who was telling Aunt Connie about the train. "Oh, Anne, is he always such a darling as this? So good?"

"I should say not. He's showing off now," remarked his mother surprisingly. "He's a pretty satisfactory child, though, if I do say it. You'll see him at his worst before long," she added with cheerful resignation. "And, Susan, I depend upon you to make him mind."

"All right. I'll do my best." Susan felt fairly confident as to results. Didn't all the mothers in the neighborhood like to have her take a hand with their children? And this one she loved from his toes to his red crown. She was delighted when he came confidently to sit on the couch beside her; proud, that he should insist on trying to push her chair out to the table at dinner-time.

After this the days flew, and Susan could scarcely find time for all she wanted to do. It was such a joy to have Anne at home. She was as fond of her family, as in the days when the task of help-

ing to steer the imaginary family car had fallen upon her young shoulders. They all felt the inspiration and cheer she brought with her.

Rose, sitting beside Susan's chair one evening when the family had congregated in the living-room, said softly, "Great to have old Nan at home again, isn't it? She seems so happy. And that makes me feel the same way.

"I thought it was dreadful when Anne got married," she went on, "but now she almost makes me feel—what should you think if some day I——"

"Ro-sie!" Jim's voice sounded across the room. "Say, Rose, Uncle's been trying to get you by wireless for the last ten minutes. He says please will you sing. He wants Anne to hear how your voice has improved."

There was no chance for further confidences. Only, as she was leaving, Rose stooped to Susan's ear to whisper, "Don't mention what I said last."

Susan felt disappointed. To-morrow she must coax Rose to finish what she had been going to say. As she sat there, listening, she had no idea that before to-morrow got far on its way something very different would be absorbing her thought.

During the early morning it seemed like any other day. Connie brought her breakfast, helped her to dress, and at ten o'clock left her in the big

chair to finish preparing a lesson before Derry's mother should arrive.

It was very still in the house. At nine Anne and Motherje had come in to say good-by; they were going to the city to shop and call on Mary Latimer. Small Archie was with his nurse; a few moments ago he had thrown kisses to her from the garden.

Presently Susan heard the front door open; a few moments later someone started up the stairs. It was much too early for Mrs. Marston who was always just on time.

Then Uncle Duncan poked his head into the room and, finding her alone, entered. He looked at her with a self-conscious, half-guilty expression which Susan could not understand.

"Why, how did you get back from the city so early?" she asked.

"Automobile. It is early, isn't it? Susan ——" Uncle Duncan stopped, coughed, and then plunged into the middle of things. "Susan, did I ever promise you I wouldn't ask you to see another doctor—I mean another who was a stranger to you?"

"You did," Susan answered with emphasis. "Now, Uncle Duncan ——"

"Now, Susan, be gentle with me. That was a bad promise, and I've come home to ask you to let me break it. Will you?"

Susan frowned. "Oh, Uncle Duncan, who is it? And when do you mean? Next week? Next month? Next ——?"

"If you say year I shall burst into sobs. Beloved Miss Oriole, this is a doctor I've heard a great deal about who lives in a distant city—a very wonderful doctor. And now he's to be within our reach—er—er—what should you say about to-morrow?"

"To-morrow!"

"I agree with you that it would be putting it off too long to wait for to-morrow. B. O., he's downstairs now—I brought him with me—and his secretary, too. Now I've told the worst, and you may do what you please with me after he's gone, but I implore you to see him—now—directly—if not sooner."

Uncle Duncan took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow. Then he fixed an imploring gaze on Susan and added, "I didn't have an idea of this when I left here this morning. I learned by chance after I got to the city that he was to be there to-day, and I induced him to come. Oh, B. O., this may be another instance of the 'long arm of coincidence' that's had a finger in our affairs. Who knows?"

His manner held such solemn appeal that Susan was impressed and recognized the unavoidable.

She couldn't embarrass Uncle Duncan and heap shame on herself by not behaving according to her best standards.

"Please call Connie," she said. "I'll be ready in five minutes after she gets here."

When the two men came into the room Susan noticed at once the doctor's smile and the eyes of the secretary. The smile was friendly—heartening; the eyes were sad—seeking something.

After that first glance she gave her whole attention to the doctor. She barely saw that the secretary sat down by the window and prepared to take notes. Once, turning her head in that direction, she realized that, in spite of the white streaks in his dark hair, his face was not old. Then, because something the doctor did to her back gave her a sudden, sharp hurt, she forgot everything else.

"There! You're a good soldier and I'm not going to bother you any more. But I'm coming again in a week—possibly ten days—and until I come I want you to stay in bed and keep still."

"Yes, sir," Susan agreed promptly. "I suppose I couldn't even go down-stairs on the couch?"

"H'm," said the doctor, and looked at her thoughtfully. "If you don't hear from me before the week is up you may be taken down for a few hours in the afternoon. But no wheel-chair—no sitting up."

"All right, sir," Susan answered, and, as she spoke, caught the sound of hasty feet in the hall outside her door.

The next instant Mrs. Marston's voice said, "Oh, Susan, dear, I'm so sorry to be late."

Before the voice had ceased, the secretary had risen from his chair with a scared, wild look in his eyes. "Who—who is that?" he questioned hoarsely, and turned toward the doctor as if for protection against vain imaginings.

It was plain to everyone that when Mrs. Marston entered the room the only person she saw was the man whose sleeping memory had been stirred by her voice.

"Why, Derrick—dearest," she said in a wistful voice, looking at him with wide-open eyes. It was as if she fancied this might be a dream, and that she should lose him again. The color fled from her face—she stepped hesitatingly toward him. "Derrick—dearest," she repeated in a tone that thrilled them all. The next moment she was in his arms.

Then, to Susan's great disappointment, the doctor, with a murmured word to Connie, somehow got them into another room, and left them to themselves.

"Well," said the doctor, coming back to where Susan lay, flushed with excitement. "That was a great happening, wasn't it? I found that man in

the hospital about ten months ago and ever since then we've been trying to help him find out who he is. And now, without any effort on the part of anyone, the thing just happens.

"It was such an interesting case I took him into my household, and he grew into the position of secretary for me. One of the best secretaries I've had, too, and now I shall have to lose him. Well, well, well! I'm glad he's got back to his family. There's a boy, isn't there? I thought I heard him inquiring for one just now."

"Yes," answered Susan, "Derry." And Connie, coming into the room, added, "I've telephoned to school for him. He'll be here in a few minutes."

"That's fine. Now, young lady, I've nothing more to say to you until I come again. Do you remember what I've already said?"

"Stay in bed a week, and then I may try the down-stairs couch. No sitting up—no wheel-chair," recited Susan.

"Good child." The doctor patted her hand and gave her a long look. "Somehow—I've a feeling—well, that'll keep till I come again. Good-by."

Susan, listening to his departing footsteps, wondered what he had started to say and felt vaguely disappointed because he had not finished. Presently Connie came into the room.

"The Marstons are coming to see you to-

morrow," she explained. "The doctor thought you'd had enough excitement for to-day. I'm going to sit in your big chair and read to you for awhile. I need to be soothed, myself."

The week that followed seemed a long one to Susan in spite of the fact that her family and friends did all they could to make it pleasant. Then there were the Marstons to rejoice over. It was comforting to know that they considered her their special benefactress. She confided to Uncle Duncan in one of their talks that, after this, she could never feel quite so sorry over her accident.

Archie Junior was the only one who could not understand and, therefore, resented her enforced seclusion. Evidently it seemed to him that his best playmate had failed him of her own accord, and he repeatedly urged her not to be "lazy gyurl." By the time the week was over Susan felt that she was not on as good terms with her nephew as she had been.

"The baby doesn't love me any more," she said to Rose who was sitting with her on Sunday afternoon. "Luckily I can go down-stairs to-morrow, and perhaps he'll like me better. Though I shan't dare to be anything but quiet till the doctor comes again."

"Speaking of doctors," began Rose, "Neil has

that appointment to the hospital in Minnesota that he's been hoping for."

"That sounds very far away. I shall miss him dreadfully, shan't you?"

"For awhile," Rose answered, in such a significant way that Susan stared at her blankly.

"What do you mean—for awhile?" she demanded.

Rose laughed and looked at her sister with shining eyes. "Goodness! I thought you'd guess right away. Why—why just as soon as Neil gets really settled he's coming back for me.

"I thought I'd tell you first because you've had to keep so still this past week. He's coming out to supper to-night, and we're going to announce it to the family."

"Well, I'm glad I shan't have to keep still about it long; I ought to be used to surprises and—and shocks by this time. I don't like the idea of having you go so far away." Susan sighed and stared out of the window.

"It isn't going to happen yet," Rose said consolingly. "And we may come back and settle in this part of the country after all. Anyway, I couldn't let Neil have adventures without me. I'm just obliged to tag along."

"Who's talking about tagging?" Robert Bruce sauntered into the room. "That's what you used

to do, Susan Sheldon, when I spent my first winter in this family. You were always at our heels when Jim and I wanted to do anything."

"I wasn't either and I don't care if I was. And I'm going to tag you if I want to. So there!" It was a spirited declaration which seemed to give Rose and Robert Bruce the utmost satisfaction.

Later, when Connie was getting her ready for the night, Susan was talking over the news about Rose.

"Were you surprised?"

"No. Were you?"

"Not much. I didn't really feel sure which—Connie, do you think Roger will mind much?"

The question took Connie by surprise and she smiled radiantly. "Why, no. I think he'll be glad; he's so fond of them both."

"Why did you smile that way? You're doing it again. Oh, Connie, I believe you know something about Roger you're not telling. Does he—does he like some other girl better than Rose?"

"He told me he liked another girl very much," averred Connie, looking very rosy now and still smiling.

"Oh, dear! Suppose she doesn't like us. Roger almost belongs to our family."

"He quite belongs." Connie turned away and began folding the cover of her couch, making it ready for the night. "Do you remember saying

that Roger and I ought to go into partnership for planning houses and gardens? Well, some day, a long time from now, we're going to do that, and the firm name will be—will be ' The Roger Bradleys.' "

She crossed the room swiftly, and dropped down by the bed, her dark head beside Susan's yellow one. " I ought not to have told you now—just after hearing about Rose," she said penitently. " But remember, darling, it's going to be a long, long time." She lifted her head and looked at her sister anxiously, full of self-reproach.

" Aren't you—aren't you going to say something? " she asked faintly.

There was a worried quaver in her voice, and Susan rose to its appeal. This was one of the times when to be a good sport was hard, but necessary.

" I—I think it's great," she affirmed with an earnestness that was almost convincing. " Two new brothers in one afternoon. Whew! " She was silent for a moment, then her face lighted with laughter.

" Oh, what a goose I've been," she said with an irrepressible chuckle. " Connie, just think how much time I've wasted trying to persuade you that Roger liked Rose best."

CHAPTER XIX

SUSAN TO THE RESCUE

It was very still in the living-room except for the crackling of the open fire, which had been lighted in honor of Susan's return to the down-stairs couch.

At this moment Susan was asleep, having been made drowsy partly by the warmth of the room and partly by the book Motherje was reading to her. In the kitchen Anne and Connie were trying a new dessert recipe; up-stairs small Archie was taking an afternoon nap. Motherje, persuaded by Susan's quiet breathing, had gone to her room to write a note which must be mailed to-day, but before leaving she set a little table close beside the couch and put a bell on it.

Somewhat later, with the tag-end of a tantalizing dream about Ellis in her memory, Susan woke to find Archie Junior standing just out of reach, with her bell in his hand. His cheeks were red and his bright eyes looked out from a tangle of curls.

"Hello!" said Susan, looking at him sleepily. "You woke up first, didn't you? Where's your Carrie?" As she spoke she remembered that the nurse was out this afternoon.

"Gone. Archie came down-stairs. Don't like naps." His eyes were roving about the room; it was an adventure to be here with no one to keep him from doing the things he liked to do. The blazing fire caught his eye—invited him.

"Archie put on coal," he announced, side-stepping toward the fireplace with his eyes on Susan. There was a metal fire-screen, but he knew from past experience how easily that could be pulled away.

"Archie ring bell—hard," coaxed Susan, beginning to have shivers of fright. If someone would only come! Instinctively she glanced toward the hall door. It was shut. The baby must have done that when he came in.

The bell dropped unheeded from the chubby hand. "No. Not ring bell. Fix fire," the small boy said with decision.

"Give the bell to Susan and then open the door," his young aunt pleaded. With the door shut she might scream her loudest and no one would hear. "Are you big boy? Big enough to open the door?"

"No. Not big nuff." And then, in his most wheedling way, "You don't want bell. You cold —want Archie to fix fire." He started again—he was within a few steps of the fire-guard now.

"Archie! Come here this minute!" Susan's

voice was stern now; she was far too frightened to be persuasive. If she could only get hold of him! Thank goodness, her arms were strong.

He faced around, smiling adorably. "Archie put coal on—fix fire—make room hot for Susan," he explained patiently.

Then he wheeled toward the fireplace and stepped out boldly. His hand was on the metal guard—he moved it with ease. The fire flared brightly in greeting.

Susan threw back the gay blanket that covered her, and with the action lost all real knowledge of what she was doing. In some way she got off the couch—in some way she traversed the short distance that separated her from the baby.

When the mist of excitement cleared she found herself on the floor, leaning against a chair, holding Archie tightly by his little dress.

"Susan not lazy gyurl—Susan runs fast," he said approvingly. Then frightened by her white face and staring eyes, his lip curled. "Archie good boy now. Go find mudder."

Susan limply let go of his dress and watched him trot across the long room. She was tempted to try to pull herself up by the chair—to find out whether she could go back to the couch the way she must have come, but she was afraid to risk failure.

Fortunately the door was not latched. Small

Archie swung it wide, and at the same moment Susan heard the front door open.

"Look who's here!" exclaimed a hearty voice that was music in Susan's ears.

"Ellis!" she called, a mounting excitement making her voice strong. "Ellis, come here!"

"Susanna! Motherje! Anne! Connie!" It was the old familiar roar of his boyish days, which had always seemed to penetrate to the remotest corners of the house. As the last name was spoken he was beside Susan.

"Quick! Put me on the couch before anyone gets here," she said without even a greeting. "And don't say where you found me. They'll be scared to death."

He was just smoothing the gay blanket when Anne came into the room with the others not far behind her. Susan, trembling, and afraid of the result of what she had done, lay with her hand in her brother's, and gradually felt calmed by that comforting clasp.

It was wonderful to have Ellis here, and dreadful that it could be only for two weeks. Everyone asked questions, and Ellis talked on and on in his deep voice. Small Archie, exceedingly well-behaved now, leaned against his mother's knee and looked from one to another.

In a momentary pause Anne was suddenly re-

minded of him. "Was your nephew properly introduced to you, Ellis?" she asked proudly.

"He was just opening the door of this room as I came in. He looked as if he didn't really care to meet me."

"Why, I left him asleep," began Anne in sudden perplexity. "How ——"

Archie Junior, who had been quiet too long, stood up straight to make explanations as though conscious of his importance.

"Had nap—came down-stairs," he began in his most concise way. "Wanted to make fire hot for Susan—she runned." He made a sweeping gesture toward the fire-guard. "Then Archie opened door—went for mudder."

"O-ho!" said Ellis softly, taking both of Susan's cold hands in his warm ones. "That was why I found you on the floor. And you runned! Isn't that encouraging?"

"Oh, I should say so. It must be," said Connie nervously, as if by very will power she could make it so.

"I don't know how I got there," said Susan, suddenly miserable, because she had seen the alarm which her mother and sisters could not at first conceal. "He shut the door and took my bell—there was nothing else I could do. He was almost in ——" she stopped with a shudder. "Even if it's

hurt me for—forever, I'm glad I did it," she ended gallantly.

"Darling, I don't believe for a moment that it has hurt you," Motherje said hearteningly. "We'll get hold of that nice doctor ——"

"Oh, Susanna! Excuse me, Mother, for interrupting, but I've just remembered something." Ellis' matter-of-fact manner was calming. "I saw Uncle Duncan in the city and he told me to say that he is bringing the doctor out this afternoon. He may be here any time."

"Then you'd better take Susan up-stairs right away," said Connie starting at once.

Susan, left alone for a moment after she was ready for the doctor, lay thinking all sorts of queer thoughts. Suppose it should be for always—no, she would not let herself think that. She would have to be some part of the imaginary family car that never moved—much. She wanted more than anything to know if she could move her feet, but she did not dare to try. She made herself think of something else. Was it only last night that Rose and Connie had surprised her with their news? And to-day Ellis had come and—and this had happened. What would be the next shock, she wondered.

She heard voices down-stairs—Father, Rose, Uncle Duncan—Ellis' deep voice. Now the doctor

was coming up the stairs talking to Motherje, and here was Connie.

Somewhat later the doctor stood erect and held out both hands to Susan. "If these fingers of mine are telling the truth, Miss Susan, this is a miracle, and you are a wonder to have done what you did without spoiling it," he said simply.

Susan scarcely noticed that Connie turned her back, and Motherje slipped out of the room. She looked only at the doctor, questioning with her eyes, not daring to put it into words.

"Yes, I do believe you're going to walk again," he answered quite as if she had spoken. "It will mean keeping still in bed for some time—we won't take any more chances. And I shall come to see you and tell you when you may run races. I shall write up your case. It's a miracle, as I said before. Why, there was only one chance ——"

"In a thousand," finished Susan with delightful audacity. "Nice little 'one'; I love it now. I'll be the goodest good you ever saw, Doctor, dear."

"You'd better," he said, pretending to be very gruff. "Now listen to my orders."

"I'll do every single thing you say," promised Susan, when the doctor had ended and was saying good-by. "And, please, when you go down-stairs you may look cheerful, but don't tell them. Send them up to me."

While she waited it occurred to her that, after all, she might have an active part in the family car. Of course for awhile she would have to be—an amusing idea struck her and she smiled.

"Standing-room only," she quoted, as the first of the family appeared, but she refused to say anything more until they had all arrived. Small Archie came on Uncle Ellis' shoulder and Susan looked at him lovingly. After to-day he belonged to her even more than he had before.

"Listen!" she began, and it was the old imperious Susan speaking. "The doctor says it's a miracle and I'm a wonder. I was afraid you might not know that last if I didn't tell you. And"—she swept them with the happiest glance they had seen for months—"he believes I'm going to walk again. Not for some time, but that doesn't matter.

"One thing more—very important"—Father had edged nearer to Susan by this time and she got hold of his hand—"I've just decided what part I am in the family machine. Considering everything that's happened—and what I've been told—I think I have the right to call myself a shock-absorber."